



Ashoka The Great

Wytze Keuning

Translated by
J.E. Steur

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Rupa & Co

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*For
All the Teachers of India*

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PREFACE

In the days of the Mauryan dynasty, Indian society was a highly organised bureaucracy, following the polity of the Arthashastra ... (This work on statecraft was) promoting the power of the King without any real regard for the wellbeing of the people or any consideration whatever for ethical values.

Ashoka was fulfilling his duty as a king as his Enlightened vision perceived it ... He hoped that: compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and virtue would spread among mankind ... For all his idealism Ashoka was a realist ... He would not tolerate crime but he would be humane towards criminals ... His compassion was counterbalanced with sternness.

— Abraham Eraly, *Gem in the Lotus:
The Seeding of Indian Civilisation*

Ashoka, the great Emperor of India, 3rd Century bce, well-known as the King of Peace, must have been born around 300 bce, lived for about seventy years, and ruled for nearly forty.

After a terrible war against the Kalingas – what is modern-day Orissa – where over one hundred thousand people were killed and even more were wounded or taken captive and deported, Ashoka showed such deep remorse, that he decided to fully embrace Buddhism and to forswear forever the wars of aggression. In its place he established his vision of ‘conquering of righteousness’, the victory of ‘Dharma’. Dharma as Buddha’s Dhamma: the system of the universal laws of life by humaneness

and righteousness, the basis of any religion. Without Ashoka Buddhism would not have become what it is now. From a small sect, split up in even smaller ones, it could grow into a world religion and so he has kept Buddha's enlightenment aflame for the seekers of today.

From Ashoka's early years there exists some well-documented information, in particular from southern sources, since it was his son Mahindra and daughter Sanghamitra, who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, from where it could spread all over South East Asia. Other traces he left were his famous edicts, carved on rocks and pillars, spread all over India. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Indian and Western scholars began numerous research endeavours on these Edicts. It was, however, not until the early twentieth century, that the 'king of the edicts', Devanampiya Pyadasi, was identified to be, without doubt, Ashoka. The picture of his later years comes mainly from these edicts.

Ashoka The Great, chronicles the life of Emperor Ashoka. It is a fictional biography; more accurately it is called historical fiction. The original Dutch version was a trilogy, published separately in 3 volumes. The trilogy was written between 1937–1947 by a Dutch scholar Wytze Keuning in Groningen in the Netherlands. These three volumes – *Ashoka: The Wild Prince*, [Book I](#); *Ashoka: The Wise Ruler*, [Book II](#) and *Ashoka: The World's Great Teacher*, [Book III](#) – are now brought together and presented in this single volume *Ashoka The Great*.

Wytze Keuning, the author, started his career as a young teacher in a primary school in the late nineteenth century. It was in those days when teachers were full of zest to elevate the uneducated classes to a higher level, to make all talents bloom. He must have been a truly classic, old-fashioned, all-round schoolmaster of a kind I have been fortunate enough to experience myself in my childhood. Our preschool teacher would open the school day at the piano and we, little kids, would sing our hearts out, unaware of the agony of a war happening around us. Growing up, I witnessed the incredible love and devotion those teachers could show in order to make children interested in new discoveries of science or the wonders of nature. Wytze Keuning's first books, in the early twenties, were written for the older primary schoolchildren of the 6th and 7th standard, giving them fascinating stories about the life of birds and bees and other such magic, in the country's different biotopes. In his free time he studied piano and volunteered to play organ. So he is remembered by his ten-year old

grandson, prior to his passing at the age of 81: the grandfather who always played the piano, accompanied on the violin by grandma, she herself once upon a time a teacher too.

Where did this interest in Ashoka come from? It is not only in India that Ashoka became recognised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a unique King. The discovery of the edicts fascinated the entire western world, in particular the teachers. Ashoka's humanistic ethical approach, as shown in the edicts, was something very much in line with their ideology. Needless to say that Ashoka became a beloved role model for many a teacher.

But what motivated the author to give up his school career as a headmaster in 1937, to decide to live on a modest pension and devote himself totally to the theme of the Ashoka books? This remains a subject of speculation. What we do know is that the trilogy was written in a tumultuous phase of history, when the world was facing the threat of a second epic war; this certainly influenced the author. It might even have felt to him as a spiritual assignment, as if it was his mission to awaken people to the message of Ashoka's life purpose: the prevention of war. By the time the first two manuscripts were completed, the country had already been invaded and the author was eager to have the books published, which required the consent of the occupiers. Seeking and obtaining such consent, was considered by quite some people as an act of collaboration with the aggressors. The author's difficult but steadfast choice to have the books published, nevertheless, tells something about his drive and character, the way he portrays Ashoka: single-minded, strong and unblemished, as the deep spiritual seeker of truth.

Ashoka The Great begins with Ashoka's teenage days, when his father sends him instead of the presumed Crown Prince, his older half-brother Sumana, as Commander to quell an uprising in the West of the empire in Taxila – near what is now Islamabad in North Pakistan.

In *Ashoka: The Wild Prince*, [Book I](#), we see in Ashoka, quite in contrast to his older brother, Sumana, a true warrior, uninterested in wanton court life, preferring to hone his skills as a warrior, to engage in deep philosophical discussions with his teachers. All is noted by his father, Emperor Bindusara, who then decides to send Ashoka to suppress the revolt in Taxila, much against the wishes of the Brahmin priestly coterie and the machinations of the court. It is now that Ashoka begins his life's journey.

His firm denial of darkness, unreason and chaos created by priests is praised and so is his courage and his ability to take swift decisions that are harsh yet sound.

In *Ashoka: The Wise Ruler*, [Book II](#), we see how Ashoka, as heir to his father's throne, becomes the fair but iron-fisted king of a vast empire. But we find that he is much more than an Emperor, he is also a man of deep compassion and indomitable courage in dealing with blood feuds. We also see the upheaval in his life caused by the Kalinga war and his evolution towards Buddhism.

In *Ashoka: The World's Great Teacher*, [Book III](#), we see the culmination of his journey in his true experience of the deep wisdom of Gautama the Buddha. Filled with compassion, he rules his kingdom according to Buddhist principles.

Ashoka and Kunala: The final volume of the trilogy goes more deeply into the relationship between Ashoka and his son Kunala. For a long time I thought this fascinating story to be the imagination of the author. Reading, though, Vincent A. Smith's *Asoka* (1890) account and the detailed information of Ananda Guruge's *Asoka, The Righteous, A Definitive Biography* (1993), I discovered that the events were recounted in the old – highly mythologised – tales of Chinese pilgrims who had visited Buddhist monasteries between the fifth to seventh century and were kept in ancient scripts.

We know from Ashoka's edicts that until four years before his death they showed an optimistic trust in the success of the spreading of Dharma by his successors. Then everything stopped. What happened then? It remains speculation, but from what old scholars collected on myths, it appears that Wytze Keuning composed the last Book of the trilogy. It is like disclosing an old family secret, of which people participating in it have no idea, but later generations get the explanation, and with that the understanding.

The third and final book of the trilogy was published in 1948, three years after the world-war. With all the effort directed towards rebuilding the devastated country it was evidently not the right time to interest the people in the reflections of a King of Peace of long ago. When the author died in 1957 the books were almost forgotten.

It is through a series of peculiar events that, some fifty years after their first publication, they came my way. At that time my love for India was

blossoming largely because of the great wisdom that one of its spiritual masters had to offer a seeking soul. How did I encounter them?

It was in the late eighties, while in India, the name 'Ashoka' came through to me and started fascinating me. It had to do with the extraordinary experiences I had that year when, for the first time, I had been in the radiance of my enlightened master.

Ashoka, who was Ashoka? So many strange names in India, but all of a sudden I saw 'Ashoka-Ice-cream', there were 'Ashoka'-hotels. He was clearly a historical figure, but from what era? There was no internet yet in those days, something that could have made my search easier. Back in the Netherlands I was too occupied with daily work to pay much attention to the name. I almost forgot about it, until later that year, browsing around in a bookshop, I saw a book on world history and – out of curiosity – looked up the name Ashoka. I felt so excited to find two columns on the Emperor of India from the third century bce, that I felt compelled to buy the voluminous book, as if it contained precious information for me. Not too long after, visiting an old friend from my student days, I came across the first two volumes of Wytze Keuning on her bookshelves. 'A Dutch book on Ashoka?' 'They are very special books,' she replied to my surprised query. 'They are the only books I read and reread. They come from the library of my grandparents. All their books went to my cousins but at least I have these ones,' she added with childlike satisfaction, as if she had received the greatest treasure of all. I asked her if I could read the books and she said: 'Certainly, take them with you. I am curious to know how you will like them.' She was in her early fifties and had for most of her life been working as a lawyer. The books were still with me when, half a year later, the dreadful news came, that she was found, killed, in her own house. Her death made the books even more precious to me. It felt as if I had a legacy to protect.

While reading the elaborate narration of Ashoka's life one might wonder who the author could be, as he seemed to know so much about India. Of the incredible amount of detailed information woven into the stories: was it historically accurate or was it mere fiction? It took me years to find out, collecting books on Ashoka, wherever I could find. The second volume of the trilogy ends with the Kalinga war. I wanted to read the last volume and find out what happened to Ashoka after that war. The books were no longer available for sale anymore but in the local library they still

were to be found. The librarian told me that the author had never been to India and had been a teacher in my own hometown, Groningen.

Soon after, a friend suggested that Wytze Keuning could be the father of his former medical professor Keuning, who was retired but still living in the city. I knew a relative of his and enquired about the possibility, but I was told he could not be the one. It is amazing how little even a relative knew about this author. The professor was indeed the son, and I discovered that the books were written almost around the corner from where I was living. This all increased my feelings that I had to do something with these books.

It was, though, not until I found the last comprehensive study on Ashoka by Dr. Ananda W.P. Guruge (*Asoka, The Righteous, A Definitive Biography, 1993*), that I discovered that whatever was known about Ashoka for certain was woven into the stories of the books. Then the last doubts I may have had were erased. These books had to be translated. The question remained: How did Wytze Keuning get all this information. The old professor, his son, could not tell. His father had written a few novels in the local vernacular; in these they could recognise him: 'That was Father!', but the Ashoka trilogy? The family had not the slightest idea. They had still kept some books the author had used. It was literature on Buddhism and geography, mainly in German and French, not directly related to the Mauryan days. There was one book on Ashoka in English, of Radha Kumud Mookerji, published in 1928. All together it gave scarce information and no clue to the obviously wide knowledge of the author.

The original version of *Ashoka The Great* was written in a very outdated Dutch, and in a style of courtesy – the Thou-form – which makes it hardly readable for people of today. But once in it, one feels easily drawn, as if you are an onlooker at the scenes yourself. It, indeed, is the kind of book for rereading; every time one does, one recognises deeper layers. The story is not just about a great king whose life choices greatly influenced world history, but also about the struggle of any spiritual seeker, anywhere in the world, in whatever era of time. Ashoka's quest and moral dilemmas are as alive now as they were in his days. The author's wide grasp of so many aspects of ancient Indian culture remains a mystery, not just for his relatives, but for anyone who reads it. Whether historical truth or metaphorical truth, it is opening our eyes to what is happening in the world, right now.

J.E.S. August 2010



Ashoka: The Wild Prince

Book I

1

THE WILD PRINCE

The young horseman raced furiously down the road, leading from the army camp of the Mauryas to the royal capital Pataliputra, shimmering from afar in the dazzling light of the Indian sun. All scurried aside humbly, until the rider's wide fluttering cloak vanished in the cloud of dust that whirled behind him in the burning air. The face of the audacious young rider was of a darkgolden bronze, his sharp features powerful and energetic. His brilliant black eyes flashed like lightening below the shiny white turban of Chinese silk, greeting the fortified city whose five-hundred towers crowned the walls of sturdy palisades. The stallion's hooves clattered over the bridge to the South Gate. The guards snapped into submissive attention for the 'Wild Prince'. Without glancing aside, he rode up the broad King's Road. Yonder rose up from behind the dark trees in the park the bright palace of the Mauryas; not until crossing the bridge he slackened his pace, galloping through the gate into the vast gardens, before finally reining in. With one vault he stood besides his sweaty steed, flocky with foam. Lovingly, he patted the horse's neck, before tossing the reins to a hastily approaching slave. Jubilant laughter of girls and young men rose from the boating lake in the middle of the wide lawn, bordering a lush and exotic park. He walked up briskly, riding-strap still in hand, till he reached the bank where clear water flowed from the mouth of a huge stone dragon's

head. Stunned, he halted, his keen eyes catching the sumptuously decorated boat with its deckhouse of finely carved teak. The oarsmen rested on command. Nubile young maidens in wispy Kashi muslin, their glossy black hairs adorned with colourful flowers, skipped lightly over the gangways and through the roomy deckhouse, chattering, laughing. What was it that brought forth such youthful excitement?

At the rear of the boat, towering above all, stood Prince Sumana, his eldest brother. The young beauties squabbled cheerfully as to who would be seated beside him as 'Rani', or queen. Sumana, ever susceptible to the charms of young female beauty, watched amused, curious to know who would win the game. The young horseman, too, looked interestedly at the enchanting scene, though his face betrayed neither amusement nor annoyance. His eyes twinkled when he noticed Aradi among the bevy of beauties, more excited than the others, her voice of a higher pitch, her bearing more confident ... Suddenly, one of the partygoers sees him.

'Prince Ashoka!'... Startled and unpleasantly surprised eyes turn towards the bank, peeking frightened at the silent young man. Aradi's upper lip curled haughtily.

'Why don't you ride over here?' Young Kunti called out with a mocking smile in her dark eyes. 'Yes, come! Come here! Tell us who the Crown Prince's queen should be!' The others now, too, scoffed and joined in the fun: 'Yes, come! Ride over!' It was impishness since 'the heir-apparent poser' had begun to surface in the capital.

Ashoka took a leap, and to the great consternation of the merry-makers, swam directly towards the boat, gripped one of the heavy oars and with his muscular arms hoisted himself onto the vessel while a slave supported the oar. Sumana, irked by his brother's untoward presence, ordered Vatsa, the boat's helmsman, to punish the oarsman. A harsh blow with a bamboo stick landed ruthlessly on the black back. Ashoka calmly grabbed Vatsa by the neck and, with one quick movement of his arm, tossed him overboard; and there he stood, wet and dripping, in the midst of the horrified group that seemed to scatter like a haze before a gust of wind.

'So, beautiful maidens, who shall be Rani?... May I suggest the beautiful Aradi!' He chased the girl, who ran away frightened, hiding first behind one, then another of her companions. Just as she was about to slip away towards an enraged Sumana, the Wild Prince wrapped her in his arms

and amidst much indignation swept her up the steps to Sumana's elevated seat.

'You, my Rani, my lovely Aradi.'

'Let go, let go!' Prince Sumana, help! Oh, Usha, Goddess of Dawn, save my precious dress! How wet and soiled. And my flowers...' she entreats, half-weeping. Ashoka smiled, the struggling girl clasped easily in his arms.

'Let me go! I do not wish to be *your* Rani!' Aradi shrieks angrily at him.

'Why not? I am the strongest, and the strongest shall be the king and choose his queen.'

'I do not wish it because you are ugly!' she hisses now 'The Crown Prince is far more handsome than you.' In that utterance she had wielded her sharpest weapon against the impetuous young man; yet Ashoka did not show how much it wounded him. His wild soul ached with tender feelings for this charming daughter of a highly placed minister. But he knew her feelings tended towards Sumana, or at least she was not insusceptible to his amorous glances. Ashoka seated himself on the bench while Sumana, dressed in a beautiful silken cloak embellished with flowers of gold and gems, fled away from the still dripping figure who had so unceremoniously broken up his charming play.

'Aradi is my queen!' cried Ashoka, triumphantly.

'Never!'

'But I love you, my Aradi,' his voice, though, weakens more than he wished.

'But I do not love you!'

'Do you love Prince Sumana, Aradi?'

'Yes, the Crown Prince,' she snaps at him offensively.

'Because he will be the Crown Prince?'

'Because he is beautiful!'

'What does my lovely nymph call beautiful?' mocked Ashoka, his voice now laced with regret.

'Whatever is the opposite of the Wild Prince!'

'Do you refer to the inner or outer person?'

'Both!'

'Your insults are stinging, beautiful Aradi.'

‘Much less than your oafishness! Who else but you would dare soil my precious dress and expose me to the ridicule of my friends and the Crown Prince! I detest you!’

‘Forgive me, Princess.’

‘I will not!’

‘Go then to Sumana. Who knows...’ Then he let her go.

In a few short leaps Ashoka reached the gangway, jumped straight into the water and with swift and powerful strokes swam around the boat towards the bank to disappear into the park.

He noticed that behind him the merriment had stopped; silence followed his foolish deed. However, when he once again glanced back at the lake, he saw how Aradi had taken place next to Sumana on the elevated seat, just as Maharajah Bindusara used to do at times with one of his Ranis. Play! He realised how his impetuous act had only weakened his chances of gaining Aradi’s love; his face tightened.

‘Will you tell me, my Guru, about the secret doctrine of the Veda? You have long taught me the sacred hymns of the *Rig Veda*¹, the dharma sutras and shastras², the grihia sutras³ for domestic life and the *Arthashastra* for statecraft. I know now of the gods and the offerings they demand, the tasks I must perform for my bodily and spiritual welfare, and also the duties of a king. My pupilage will soon end. My wish now is to learn the deepest secret of the doctrine.’

‘You yourself, O Prince, have a great respect for Shiva.’

‘Certainly, my Guru. Shiva, the Lord of Knowledge, who imparted wisdom to the rishis, and music and art. He is the Lord of the Universe who, seated in his glistening Himalayan palace, governs earth and heavens by his powerful *manas*⁴; he is the Lord of Death, the destroying power of the All, and Tamagnah, destroyer of the darkness of ignorance, the Lord of the setting sun and the steer towards death and killing. This is what I realise daily from all that you taught me, it shines upon me, clear and lucid as a moonlit night. Shiva-Rudra, Shiva, the great Guru, the creator and destroyer. Neither Agni, nor Brahma, nor Varuna speak to me through their actions, but Shiva does! Will you initiate me in the secret end doctrine⁵ of the Brahmins, my Guru? Or, was it said of my grandfather, Chandragupta, that he was a Shudra? Then I would be as well.’

‘Shudra is a stinging term of abuse coined by your grandfather’s enemies, or ... other interested factions. As long as your grandfather was convinced that he was inferior to them, they, the vanquished, were inclined to acknowledge him as king. Furthermore, the Brahmins from Magadha and Madhyadesa call anyone not twice-born of the three varnas, a Shudra. Perhaps, the denigration began with *suta*, that is: *offspring*, the seed of a Kshatriya man and a Brahmin woman. In their envy they probably sought the most venomous snakebite...’

‘So teach me then, my Guru, on the secret of the Veda.’

Kullika slowly stroked his hands over his eyes and gazed along the wide road leading southwards from Pataliputra towards Gaya. The rainy season had passed; Asvina, the first month of autumn, was over and the wintry sun of Karttika had dissolved all the mist.

‘Just like a fully burgeoning lotus pond, good fortune covers the earth. Human laughter and the happy calls of the animals clamour through fields and forests. All that is alive shakes off rain and dust. The palm trees shiver with renewed energy, the acacia glows in golden splendour, the sala spreads its blossoms as if it were a young maiden. What is the force that drives all of this to rise out of nothingness, O Prince. What is this power?’

‘Life, my Guru.’

‘And life?’

‘That is ... the consciousness ... no, more.’

‘That is Brahman; that is you, that is me, O Prince.’

Ashoka pondered for a long time.

‘Brahman is life ... you are life ... I am life ...’

‘No, Brahman is the spiritual power that unfolds itself in all that lives; the power which creates worlds and preserves and absorbs them again to unfold itself ever anew before our senses. Atman is the delicate remainder, when all that is external falls away; it is our true inner being, our own self, our soul⁶. And the deep knowing, the teaching of the secret doctrine is, that Brahman and Atman are one, one indivisible unity. The forms, plants, animals, people, gods: all are of maya, illusion, deception, the veiling of the truth. The essential, the real is Brahman, is Atman, the Vast, the All-God and All-Spirit. He who seeks to know Brahman can only experience it in his own self, his atman. ‘Brahman’ ... ‘Atman’ ... These are the sacred

syllables ... *Tat Tvam Asi*, That Thou art ... *Aham brahma asmi*, I am Brahman ... *Brahman atman aiikyam*, Brahman and Atman are one ... It is the unity, the oneness of things, O Prince.

*It is called Indra, Varuna and Mitra,
Agni, the beautifully winged bird of heaven;
Many names the Rishis gave for what is only one,
It is called Agni, Yama, Matarisvan,*

So sings Dirghathama at the closing of his 'Oneness hymn.'⁷

'And Shiva...?' hesitated Ashoka.

'Atman.'

'And a Brahmin... and a Kshatriya ...?'

'Atman.'

'And a Vaishya... and a Shudra... ?'

'Atman.'

'And snakes... sacrificial animals?'

'All are of Atman, unfolding itself in all living forms of nature, which we can only find, feel and know in the depth of our own self.'

'My Guru, what then separates you and me from the most contemptible Shudra ... or, worse yet, the so-called untouchable Chandala?'

'It is maya!'

'Maya? so in essence we are all one!'

'One in Atman.'

'How can one liberate the world and myself then from this vast illusion?'

'You yourself through study, awareness, inner growth. The world should not be freed from maya; each one must liberate himself, or the *liberation* is worthless, O Prince ... Human power is based on maya. The human being founds his existence on selfishness, thus on maya.'

Kullika looked at him but Ashoka's face did not reveal the depth to which he was stirred by his guru's words. Finally, he turned to Kullika:

'It is as if you suddenly set ablaze a dark world with Surya's bright light, my Guru. His light is blinding.'

‘He who may one day ascend Magadha’s ivory throne and hold the lives of millions in his hands, has to know this’.

‘How can anyone who so believes, how do I then, ever dare to judge or kill?’ A glimmer of happiness shone in Kullika’s eyes.

‘It is Shiva-Brahman who will show you the way, O Prince; your own atman. He himself will judge if the great Guru, Shiva, does elevate you to the throne.’

Ashoka considered at length.

‘Who shall succeed Bindusara as the Maharajah, Sumana or I?’ he asked after a silence which did not disturb Kullika.

‘Maharajah Bindusara will decide that for himself.’

‘My highly respected father, the Emperor, is wise and strong. May Yama, the Lord of Death, spare him for many years yet for India⁸.’

‘Surya be praised, who shot this beam of light into your heart, your atman, O Prince.’

Ashoka climbed the Barren Mountain by the side of the wide road. His clear gaze swept, like Surya’s light, from his dark eyes over the widespread landscape at his feet, over the rivers Sona and Ganga, over Pataliputra⁹ yonder, from where Bindusara governed. It wandered over the hazy land, where far away the Himalaya, the abode of Shiva, bordered and even much farther away Taxila, Sindh and Ujjain ...

Kullika halted for a short moment. Ugly, unsightly? Strength and life emanated from every muscle, while sparkling eyes betrayed a will, too powerful perhaps for the young unbridled spirit. What was it that possessed this fresh life? Was it vanity and selfishness that sought to seize the crown: Bindusara’s fear? Or, was it dissatisfaction with all that heaved around him under his clear gaze? He always questioned; expressed little of what stirred him. He penetrated with a clear mind the wisdom of the Veda; whether he accepted or saw contradictions, however, was something even his Guru did not know. The Maharajah had watched with fear in his heart what moved and drove the Wild Prince, as he looked at his son’s fiery training in weaponry, or when he made presumptuous comments about governance and laws.

Kullika climbed slowly up towards his pupil. Ashoka was deeply lost in his wild, stormy thoughts. Toiling together they reached the top.

‘Let us turn back, O Prince, Rudra’s¹⁰ dark flock of Maruts¹¹ approach Magadha.’ Ashoka deeply breathed in the moist fragrant forest air. Suddenly he turned to Kullika and said: ‘Will Sumana ever be able to conquer that selfishness, or even contain it, my Guru?’

‘Minister Sadhava says that Sumana’s sincere Brahmanical faith will help him overcome all his difficulties.’

‘And what do you say, my Guru?’

‘Judgement ill-befits me as I would be partial.’

‘You avoid ... my Kullika. Does Magadha—indeed, our whole beautiful India—need powerful kings like Chandragupta and Bindusara?’

‘Yes, O Prince.’

‘Will Sumana be a powerful king and rule himself, or will his ministers rule?’

‘I may not judge this.’

‘Will I, Ashoka, supposed wild Prince, be capable of ruling India?’

‘I know you mostly through my feelings, O Prince, and they say: ‘Yes’. The rain is nearing, do you not hear it in the distance? It approaches with a heavy rumbling from the ocean. Shiva hurls his lightning already from afar. They thunder like hosts of armies upon us.’

‘Every flash of lightning is a lucky one, conveyed by Brahman, atman ... thus ... which to Atman will return, my Guru.’

‘There is danger upon this high ground, O Prince. He who challenges Rudra Shiva will be struck by his fiery arrows.’

‘Shiva does not kill his most devoted friend ... his own self ... Atman! Kill me, Shiva, if you deem me unworthy to be Maharajah!’

Prince Ashoka remained standing, his face was calm, as if unmoved by anything.

With exasperating slowness Rudra propelled a heavy gray cloud up from the ocean over the land of Magadha. Kullika shivered at the sight; the Prince stood unyielding. Vayu, Lord of the Winds, suddenly bent the palm leaves to the ground, blustered through the glossy branches of a pair of jack-fruit trees and beat his drum through the bamboo woods, shaking the stately banyan trees by their many aerial roots. The thunderstorm slid over their heads like a dark, lead-blue drape. The downpour approached with a clatter. The Guru fell to the earth and begged Indra and Shiva’s protection for him and the Prince; yet Ashoka remained standing atop the Barren

Mountain, motionless. It appeared as though his eye pierced through the heavy sheets of rain to peer over the great kingdom of Maharajah Bindusara. Neither the harsh lightning flashes nor the clashing thunder claps were able to affect even one fibre of his hard facial muscles. Like Shiva meeting Shiva ... amidst the bursting elements ... aiming bolts of lightning, lashing great trees, scattering animals and boulders alike with his fury ... amidst the deafening battering, weeping, rattling ... while the clouds showered upon him the nectar of heaven¹².

Kullika rose up. Admiration—naye, Awe—burgeoned like the jungle during rains, when he saw Ashoka still standing there, motionless, in the same position, his mind's eye penetrating through the wall of rain and lightning, as if uniting India in all her infinite vastness by his gaze.

*He, who, like a good rider does his steed,
Leads the people as if with reins,
Steadfast of heart, yet quickest of the quick.*¹³

The storm abated, the rains lightened to a drizzle.

‘Hail Shiva!’

Kullika bowed deeply to the Prince. They then descended to the Gaya road.



2

JIVAKA'S SACRIFICE

'Surya sends its warming rays upon your drenched cloak, O Prince.'

'On the farm over there dwells a Vaishya, my Kullika, who will have a sacrifice tonight. The sacrificial altars of Shiva, Brahma and *Varuna*¹ are still dripping from the rain; come, let us ask for fresh milk and dry clothing. Those who bring offerings to the gods will surely be hospitable.'

Inside Kullika's mind flashed a strange thought: this youth ... the incarnation, the embodiment ... of Shiva? Appeared not Krishna once as a charioteer, Indra as warrior? Shiva, who through his manas, his yoga, governs and guides nature ... 'Shiva does not kill his own self ...' Why no fear, where all beings feared ... such deep serenity, where all that lived trembled? Those eyes ... clear and blazing like Surya's light! They looked as if they pierced through the All.

The Guru—full of wondrous, miraculous Vedic images—could not but look at the Prince with reverent awe, he who had calmly and confidently strode into the Vaishya house.

Kullika greeted the farmer.

'Come into Jivaka's home, noble Sirs. Welcoming guests is the ever fruit-bearing offering to the creator, Prajapati.'

'Bless you, my Jivaka. May many sons be born to you!'

‘Thank you, Lord. For many years I have faithfully performed the forty rites that the sage Gautama requires of the Vaishya. My wedding to Rohini was performed by the Brahmin Narada. My house is built on black soil and hymns were offered to Vatospati. Day after day I perform the required offerings. Alas, the *garbhalambhana*-mantras² did not ensure Rohini’s pregnancy; no son was born to me. Tonight, I will bring a great sacrifice: a soma-offering, a pure white cow and a black ram for Shiva.’

‘And do you think you will beget a son by this sacrifice?’

‘Narada says: ‘The Brahmin who has the knowledge, in his hands will rest the power of the gods’ ... if I will bring the sacrifice and the fee into line with the significance of the occasion.’

‘And what is the fee?’ asked Ashoka.

‘I have promised Narada as much as he deems necessary.’

‘That is more resolute than wise’.

‘I must have sons, at least one son, Lord. What is a Vaishya without sons? Who shall propitiate with offerings when Yama calls me and I have gone to the World of the Forefathers?’

‘But the gods depend on the offering, not on the fee.’

‘Do you know that for certain, Lord?’

‘If the mantras are chanted properly, the samhitas recited with care, the obligatory offerings brought, the altars constructed according to the rules, the gods will have to honour your wish.’

‘But if the priests do not receive the suitable fee, they will not perform the sacrifice in the right manner.’

‘You could force them!’ said Kullika.

Jivaka considered at length. Ashoka waited in suspense for the farmer’s decision.

‘I shall speak with Narada! And I invite the gracious lords to attend the offering.’ Ashoka nodded.

‘Our clothes are soaked, Jivaka. Can you help us with better ones?’

‘Not with better ones, Lord. Your clothing is of very fine fabric. But with dry ones, yes.’

He hurried inside and returned shortly with two cloths.

‘The cloth is fine and soft, Jivaka.’

‘Rohini wove it herself, Lord, made one cloth for a Brahmin and the other for me.’

‘She could weave a cloth for the Emperor, Jivaka.’

‘The gods, Lord, if they would but give her a son!’

Ashoka chose the cloth meant for the Vaishya and felt very comfortable. He walked across the land to see how Sanaya, the *adhvaryu*, was preparing the sacrificial altar. The *adhvaryu* did not even look up at the man in the Vaishya-cloth. He was painstakingly constructing a square, dedicated to Shiva; he calculated, measured, measured again the length and height of the lines, and intoned verses appropriate to each calculation and measurement. Narada, the *Brahman*, the chief priest, dutifully checked everything a second time. Jivaka approached him humbly.

‘What is your fee, Lord?’

‘Half of all your cows and a handful of gold.’

Jivaka was shaken. ‘How can I then pay my dues on the land to the Maharajah, Lord?’

‘I have thought very seriously about how to ensure the favour of the gods through this sacrifice, my Jivaka. I have chosen Sudhana as the *hotar*, who is known far and wide for his knowledge of the *Rig Veda*; he recites the verses without the slightest error and gives them always the right intonation. None of the gods can resist this. Asita shall chant the Vedic Samans, there is no better singer in all of *Jambudvipa*³. My *adhvaryu*, Sanaya, has even studied in Taxila, to learn how each angle, each circle, each square and the manifold of these must be correctly constructed. And why then did you come to me, entrust me with complete control? Surely, not because I belong to the ignorant Brahmins! The fee must be as I have indicated. Otherwise it would be impossible for me to make these sacrifices and dedicate the prayers. The gods will consider themselves absolved of their obligations to me if you do not pay the fee.’

‘May I pay the gold, Lord?’ asked Ashoka, who had by now come nearer.

‘Who are you? You are a Vaishya, I see, if your garment does not deceive me. Who is your father, who is your mother?’

‘Thousands of Brahmins have already received devout endowments from my Father’s hand. My Mother is also an Aryan. So, please do not be perturbed, Brahmin.’

‘I am delighted, my young one, that you have such a devout father, and Jivaka such rich friends. But I am sorry to have to tell you: I have set the fee too low. You know, of course, that it must be in conformity with one’s possessions. The gods will not accept the sacrifice if you are able to pay more and do not. You must pay me two handfuls of gold, my Jivaka. For less, I cannot be certain of my power over the gods.’

Jivaka bowed humbly. Ashoka turned away from the two men, and walked up the road that led to Gaya. A strange bewailing music could be heard. He listened, a *ravanastha*⁴ ... A soft tender melody sang through the trees: wonderful, captivating music.

‘What is that?’ he asked a Brahmin passing by, who stared haughtily ahead, considering the question unworthy of a reply.

‘It is unsuitable music,’ answered a Vaishya.

‘What do you think unsuitable?’

‘The melody being played is a winter song, as befits Vasanth, and it is now Hemant. Who dares play Hindola and Sriraga at the same time!’⁵ Moreover, Jivaka is making his momentous sacrifice for a son, which the gods have withheld so far. No pious Vaishya would harm such a serious and costly sacrifice. Perhaps, Sasarman is intentionally playing his disturbing melodies in wild spring rhythms. They say he and Rohini desired each other, but her father wanted Jivaka to be her husband, because Sasarman squanders his time with the ravanastha. His fields produce not the half of others’, his cows and goats are thin as the trees high in the mountains, but Jivaka is diligent, thrifty and rich.’

‘But,’ ventured Ashoka, ‘Jivaka squanders his riches on expensive offerings.’ ‘The result is that both grow poor.’

The Vaishya gazed at the Prince, alarmed. ‘Do penance for those angry words: Rudra, Varuna and Vayu will otherwise withhold you their blessings, which a Vaishya needs! That is why he rewards the holy Brahmins with joy. Sasarman recklessly spurns the precious gifts of Sita.’⁶

Again, Ashoka listened to Sasarman’s playing.

The farmer continued: ‘Such music cannot please the gods, he plays for Rohini, I do not doubt it, and therefore he will suffer the torments of hell. A Vaishya playing love songs for the wife of another is already committing adultery.’

‘Even if they stole that woman from him?’

‘Rohini’s father and the Brahmins consecrated Jivaka’s marriage and so it is sacred.’

‘Even if Jivaka cannot beget sons?’

‘Certainly, Jivaka can have sons begotten for him.’

‘And that is not adultery?’

‘No, that is how the gods have decreed. So wills *Manu*.⁷

Ashoka walked in the direction of Sasarman’s farm.

‘You play sinful music, Sasarman.’

Startled, the Vaishya looked up. Then he laughed.

‘I know no music that is sinful, Vaishya. It comes from deep within my soul, from my atman, and that is, according to the *Upanishads*⁸ of the great Atman. What is of atman is of Brahman.’

‘Let us then hear a melody of Bhairavi, the god of tonality, those prescribed for the evening.’

Again, Sasarman laughed, this time loudly. ‘What the Brahmin priests prescribe does not affect me.’

‘You offend again. Which Vaishya dares to speak this way about the holy Brahmins?’

‘So holy, that they live richly of the painfully gathered harvests that the devout Vaishyas pay for with their blood.’

‘Why do you not work?’

Ashoka’s clear gaze forestalled a rude response.

‘Should I work hard to fatten the Brahmins? Hahaha! They, who stole my bride! Jivaka was rich ... there was more to gain ... so he had to be Rohini’s husband. The Brahmins ordered it. Upon their orders Rohini was fiercely guarded by her father, brother, and neighbours. Have you never noticed that rich Vaishyas are the Brahmins’ favourites? Like the leaf lice are of white ants? Had I been a Kshatriya and known how to handle weapons, I would have captured her and killed all who stood in my way.’

‘For the King, too, you should work.’

‘He receives what is due from me.’

‘But it is too little.’

‘My fields do not yield more,’ laughed Sasarman.

‘Must you disturb Rohini’s sacrifice?’

‘Jivaka’s sacrifice! The feast of the Brahmins! Jivaka is close to ruin from all those sacrifices; he thinks that this way he will buy a son from the Brahmins. When he is poor, there will no longer be any feasts! And Rohini’s and Jivaka’s fate will not bother them!’

‘Do you not trifle with your own fate, Sasarman?’

‘May I be reborn as a tiger; I shall eat none other than Brahmins. Or, as a cobra; I shall spit poison into their feet. Or, as a mosquito; I shall prick the fever into their blood. Or, ...’

‘Rohini wishes for a son.’

‘Jivaka wishes for a son! And the Brahmins wish their bellies full of soma and meat. That is the *ansha*⁹ of their song of greed.’

Sasarman picked up his fiddle once again.

Ashoka listened in consternation. How could a Vaishya be so careless! Hell ... endless rebirths into the lowest forms ... Or, was that also maya? ‘Thou art that’ Was not this Vaishya, too, spirit of the All-spirit, just as the most holy Brahmin? He then whispered: ‘You are incautious, Vaishya!’

‘Brahmins are merciless. Rohini was mine and they robbed me of her, stolen for their bellies, for their gold pouch, their cattle stall.’

Ashoka returned to Jivaka. Just then Narada’s brahmacharins came to lead away the cattle, the payment for the offering, before the rituals took place. Narada joined Jivaka in order to select the cows himself. Jivaka stared with glassy eyes at his beloved animals, feeling regret—then later, guilty—and murmured a prayer of atonement. He must have at least one son, even if it cost him his entire property. He then retrieved the gold from their secret hiding place and handed it to the priest.

‘It is poorly measured, Jivaka.’

‘Rohini measured it herself, Lord.’

‘Then you go and measure it with your hands.’

‘Two handfuls, Lord!’

‘You know I meant your hands.’

‘Lord, there is hardly any left.’

‘Your rich relative wishes to lend you some.’

Jivaka waited a moment. Dare he ask? But the sacrifice had to succeed! Hesitantly, his request came out:

‘Lord, swear first the *tanunaptram*!’¹⁰

Narada drew himself up, and uttered with indignation: ‘Is the Vaishya more devoted to his belongings than to his karma? Do you distrust your priests?’

‘I want a son, Lord!’ said Jivaka, trembling.

With head bowed, he went back and returned with the required amount of gold.

Then Narada solemnly recited the oath, invoking Agni.

The moon rose in serene splendour over the woods around Rajagriha and cast its silvery white light over the sacrificial site, hushed by a faint mist which draped the forest after the rainfall. Jivaka led Rohini into the circle of friends and family, who had come not only to make the offering more pleasing to the gods, but also to enjoy the left overs. That Rohini had proved infertile, unworthy of even a daughter, was an unbearable misfortune. Jivaka wanted a son! Would she have to accept a second wife beside or even above her? Or, if even such offering will yield no result, would he then compel her to beget another man’s son? Her offerings to the gods were always twice the size of those made by others of their varna. Moreover, how many special sacrifices had she not brought to the god of fertility? She never forgot Sita in her prayers. She adhered to the forty rites with great care, kept her house clean; no metal vessels that were not polished were ever used. After each such ceremony, she herself broke the earthenware pots and jars that were used for milk, ghee, and butter. Whenever she could, she offered her guests—Brahmins and other Aryans—everything their hearts desired. No one was as hospitable as Rohini to those who came to her door. Yet, the blessing she has so longed for eluded her. Month after month, year after year, brought only disappointment. How had she sinned?

The hotar loudly invoked Varuna, Indra, Shiva, Agni, and other gods of the three worlds—heaven, ether, and earth—to Jivaka’s offering feast, and invited them to take their places on the holy kusha-grass, gathered with love, and carefully spread around the place of sacrifice. A shiver ran through the Vaishyas; the gods were now in their immediate presence. Yet, the Brahmins remained unmoved, for they related to them in their daily lives. Invisible, they came and seated themselves, the *Devas*¹¹ who had descended from their celestial dwellings to enjoy Jivaka’s gifts and Rohini’s purity. How could they ignore Narada’s powerful rituals? He would force them with his mighty hand, supported by his karma. He would quench their

hunger and thirst with soma and meat, but afterwards he would demand of them the boon sought by the sacrificer. Ashoka left the gathering. Kullika tried to stop him, saying that Narada would first speak to Rohini. The Prince acknowledged him with a wave of his hand and strolled to the place where Rohini would confess.

Narada approached Rohini and led her some distance from the sacrificial site.

‘Will you confess truthfully, Rohini, and conceal nothing from the one who leads Jivaka’s great offering?’

‘The whole truth, Lord, and I shall conceal nothing from you.’

‘Well then, do you attend the sacrifice with a pure and innocent heart?’

‘Surely, Lord.’

‘You are aware of no sins?’

‘No, Lord.’

‘Do you do everything needed for an auspicious conception: offerings, prayers, alms, hospitality for the Aryans?’

‘Of course, Lord, and all the forty rites.’

‘Who do you think bears the blame for your deficient marriage, you or Jivaka?’

‘I do not know.’

‘I know Sasarman wished you for his wife. Did you wish for him as well?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Do you now keep him away from your husband’s house? If a woman who has a husband still sees another man, she commits an offence against Varuna.’

‘He remains outside Jivaka’s house, Lord.’

‘And outside your heart?’

‘Lord, Sasarman’s soul sings through the ravanastha. I cannot shut my ears. His songs waft through the woods. I cannot put my mind to sleep.’

‘You belong to only one man: Jivaka?’

‘Yes, Lord. I would not wish to commit any mortal sin.’

‘Does your husband do everything to acquire a son? Does he seek no other women? Does he donate the fee befitting the importance of the offering?’

‘Lord, I do not know what my husband does when I am not with him, nor do I know about his wealth. But I believe that he is an upright man and husband.’

‘If the sacrifice should not be fruitful now, would he then wish to bring a greater offering?’

‘I do not know, Lord.’

‘Try to find out and let me know.’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Did you commit sins in previous lives for which you must now do penance, sins which have caused the gods to withhold sons from you now?’

‘Lord, how would I know? New life erases the memory of the past ones, does it not?’

‘Have you ever sought a sage for an explanation as to why no sons have been born to you?’

Rohini sobbed.

‘Lord, I have neglected nothing, night and day I have prayed, performed the forty rites of the Vaishya faithfully. And now Jivaka is making a costly sacrifice ... for a son.’

‘Would you be honestly persuaded that if the offering should not bear fruit, it is your sins in a previous life, my Rohini, which you are atoning for?’

‘Lord, you are a wise Brahmin, I must believe you when you say so. I myself am not aware of any sins.’

Suddenly, a profoundly tender song floated through the night. It was as if the nymphs of Bhairavi floated over the Vaishya’s fields and silently danced in Chandra’s beams. The putras and their *bharyas*¹², hearing the heavenly ragas, nestled down in the young grasses and listened to Sasarmans’s love song.

‘Shut your ears, Rohini, if you do not wish to nullify the sacrifice. Take your place again and go on dutifully with the offering.’ Narada then thrust his fist towards Sasarman: ‘Cursed are you, disrupter of the everlasting sacred sacrifice. May Yama trap your false neck as if you were a beast to be sacrificed.’ Rohini shrank back.

The Brahmins from the surrounding areas happily joined Jivaka’s ceremony. They took their place in the front because only they had the right to consume the choicest left overs of the offering. They talked and laughed

over the jests that were made, becoming increasingly incensed at the fiddler who wanted to disrupt the sacrifice. With loud voices they recited the terrible punishment awaiting him in hell and in other births to come.

Asita, the Udgatar, began the recitation of the sonorous samans from the sacrificial place, which in its loudness drowned out the faint, far-off sounds of the strings. In awe, the gathering murmured its approval of the holy chants of the Hotar and was glad the intrusive and sacrilegious sounds of the ravanastha were suppressed by the powerful renderings of the priest. The Adhvaryu, who had lit the three fires and greeted the flames, now poured into the sacred ladles the soma that had been squeezed thrice with great care by Rohini. Thus, in the glow of the fire, still softly intoning, he reverentially offered it to the gods, who had now descended and were seated on the kusha-grass. The Brahmins awaited their gifts and the Vaishyas listened in silent worship of the gods to the sonorous—and to them unintelligible—Vedic chants. When the offering was over, Jivaka and Rohini presented the Brahmins with the soma. They greedily drank the fiery juice.

Sasarman's voice was now again heard in the distance. He recited a verse from the *Rig Veda*:

*We all have various likings, various is what we wish:
A broken wheel for the wagon maker, for the healer a broken leg,
For the priest, the one who squeezes the soma,
May the soma flow towards Indra!*

Narada knew the verse, but hearing it from the lips of a layman angered him. He hid his anger, though, and continued with the ceremony. The Adhvaryu gathered the animals and tied them to the pole. The soma gave him strength for the heavy work he had yet to do. Rohini looked with distressed eyes at the white cow, her favourite, chosen by Narada for the sacrifice. The goats bleated, frightened of the human beings and the ominous air. The Hotar once again invoked the gods to take their places before the fire. The adhvaryu grabbed the nooses and, untying the animals, put the loop one by one around their necks, performing yayus with each of his actions. Crying, gasping and struggling, each beast had its last breath squeezed out. Nothing from the offering was to be spilled or wasted, not even a drop of blood. The priest knew his work. Jivaka muttered prayers,

and Rohini grieved deeply for her beloved animals, but forcefully suppressed her feelings. For had not the priest said the sacrifice was necessary? The Udgatar's mantras reverberated, creating among the guests a great desire for the offerings. The Brahmins received the tongue, neck and withers, trunk and legs, loin for the men and the belly for the women. They all feasted, except for Rohini, who reluctantly took one small piece of meat. The Brahmins drank the soma with their meal, soma which no Vaishya was allowed to taste. The merriment grew apace as Chandra proceeded on his path with a full laughing face.

Ha, the violator of the offering! Again, his voice raged through the night:

*Just as the priests are sitting at night
With the sweet soma
Around the brimful vessel and deliberate,
So do you frogs, now celebrate the day... ..
Yes, priests they are, who, full of the sweet soma,
Loudly chant the prayer of this great day.*

'Come, Vaishyas, who will catch the violator of this sacrifice who mocks the holy Brahmins, bind him and take him to the king tomorrow?'

A few Vaishyas sprang up and charged towards the dwelling of the heretic, cursed by Narada, and bound him. The next day they would deliver him to the Maharajah's durbar in Pataliputra, where the court was held. The ceremony proceeded; the soma vanishing like dew in the hot summer sun, the meat disappearing like hail in Surya's rays.

Rohini's heart shrank upon hearing Sasarman's audacious singing. She was hardly able to complete the circumambulation around the altars. This sacrifice could not bring her a son. After all, which god would grant a boon amidst these desecrated prayers? Narada saw her alarmed face. He approached Jivaka.

'No sinner can disrupt the ceremony of my priests, Jivaka. The power of their prayer is greater than that of the gods.'

'Your words are holy, Narada.'

The Brahmins and other Aryans ate on greedily, the fat dripping from their hands and chins. With huge, noisy gulps, the members of the highest

varna feasted on the soma which clouded their brains. Their loose tongues praised the sacrifice.

‘The Vaishyas should offer more. It will only be to their advantage. The gods will forget them if they are not more generous with their animals and soma.’

‘Narada is not easily pleased. He should lower the fee for the offering, then the offering will be greater,’ Pindola suggested, the soma loosening his tongue.

‘The more expensive, the more desirable,’ whispered Jamana. ‘Too little and they will not appreciate it.’

‘In any case, my Pindola, it is not good for you. You stagger, though you barely tasted a drop of soma,’ breathed another in his ear.

‘Rohini might well be able to conceive a son of mine, at least if Jivaka is the guilty one the gods are punishing,’ concluded Pindola.

This remark led to lewd sniggers amongst the men who heard it, but Pindola, convinced by his claim, stared thoughtfully into the distance.

‘The Kamasutras, the sacred teachings on love, would find you blameless,’ assessed Muda, who was as fond of scandals as he was of soma. ‘It would be better to teach her the means of the Kamasutras, which would increase Jivaka’s potency,’ noted another in a serious tone.

‘I will provide her with those tomorrow. I am free to pay her a visit, for the sutras say ... as long as it is done for other reasons.’

‘Drink your soma and keep quiet!’ hissed Tjitaka. ‘Should Jivaka’s sacrifice be destined to fail, will you degrade the Brahmin varna even more than is happening already nowadays? Is it not annoying enough that a Vaishya, yonder, dares to mock the priests while we dedicate an offering to the gods? You make yourself guilty with your foul talk!’

‘It is the Soma that makes me say more than usual, more even than I wish,’ Pindola stammered weakly.

Once again, stifled laughter.

‘Then we can hardly blame a Vaishya who does not restrain himself if the Brahmins ridicule themselves,’ whispered Jala angrily.

Munda then cracked a joke: ‘Who visited Drona recently to provide the same services?’

‘I will not discuss this at gatherings where other varnas are present.’

Ashoka had drawn near the Brahmins, unnoticed, and with his keen hearing had followed the entire conversation. Finally, he asked:

‘Would the honourable Brahmins like to answer a question for me? I believe that you are all wise and know the laws, for Manu says: ‘As many mouthfuls that a man, who does not know the law, swallows during an offering ceremony to the gods or to the forefathers, as many must the presenter of the meal swallow of red-hot spokes, spears, or iron balls after his death.’ And you do not wish to inflict that misery on Jivaka, do you?’

‘Who are you? Do you know the Rishis, young Vaishya? For Manu also says: ‘Just as a farmer does not harvest when he plants his seed in infertile soil, so will the presenter of the offering meal not reap rewards if he gives it to a man who is ignorant of the Rishis.

‘I know the Vedas, honourable Brahmins.’

‘Well now, then ask!’

‘What makes the sacrifice a success?’

‘The animals!’ shrieked Pindola.

‘And the soma,’ scoffed Jamana, who thought the Vaishya bold.

‘And what of the role of the priests?’ asked Ashoka. Kullika listened nervously. He feared his pupil would say things that were risky.

‘That depends not on the sacrifice, but on the correct performance.’

‘And the guests?’

‘They cooperate with their attention. You would do well to listen and participate in that way, otherwise Jivaka may be sorry he invited you. Take your place once again! That is better than to keep leaving your seat,’ added Muna, speaking down to him. He had noticed the young man more than once leaving his place. But Ashoka was not in the least unnerved by the arrogant answers of the Brahmins.

‘And the invited members of the highest varna?’

‘The Brahmins are the sacrificial table for the leavings of the offering gifts, impudent young fellow.’

‘No more?’

‘No more.’

‘Must they not, in gratitude for the hospitality they enjoy, try to help create the best possible atmosphere for the offering?’

‘Gratitude applies solely to the one who is offering.’

‘Why then is it that the Aryans keep offering less nowadays, honourable Brahmins?’

‘It is the heretics that more and more are leading the unwitting Aryans astray: the followers of the *Shakyamuni*¹³, the Jains, the Ajivikas, the loose-lipped *sannyasins* and *vanaprasthas*¹⁴ from the forest recluses, who attempt to convey the secret doctrine to those for whom it is not intended.’

‘These heretics do not know the Brahmins,’ remarked Ashoka rather ambiguously.

‘That is a ray of light striking the mind of a Vaishya,’ snapped the other.

‘Then nothing can disturb the good outcome of the offering, if the payment is made, the animals are correctly offered, the remainders enjoyed by the Aryans, according to their varna?’

‘No.’

‘Even less can a verse from the *Rig Veda* disturb.’

‘No, for that the revealed scriptures are too sacred.’

‘That means Sasarman is not guilty. He could not possibly disturb the sacrifice; the verses he recited were from the scriptures.’

‘But untimely, and in any case, inappropriate at Jivaka’s offering.’

‘Can a Veda text ever be inappropriate?’

‘From the mouth of a heretic! As inappropriate as it is for a Vaishya to ask probing questions to the Brahmins!’

‘Thus you consider it sinful of the holy Haridrumata to take on Nachiketu as brahmacharin, although he had confessed that his mother did not know whose son he was because she had served in different households!’

‘Disturb the offering no longer with such impious questions, young Vaishya!’

‘I thank the holy Brahmins for their friendly willingness to answer me,’ replied Ashoka. He then turned away. The Brahmins looked on indignantly.

‘Who is that headstrong Vaishya?’ one of them asked of Kullika.

‘Who art Thou? Who am I? Who were you in a previous life? Who is he? Can it be Shiva?’ the Guru asked all of a sudden, as he could not but keep thinking of what had happened on the Barren Mountain.

‘Shiva has been invoked by the Hotar to the ceremony and he has been offered a seat on the holy kusha-grass. Shiva knows all that has taken place

here. Did not Krishna appear as Arjuna's charioteer? Why could not the young one be Shiva in the cloth of a Vaishya! Could he have risen from the kusha-grass and entered into the young Vaishya? Did you see the look in his eyes? Shiva, god of fertility, but also god of life and death!'

Kullika's words brought much excitement to the susceptible and superstitious men who kept up a fierce murmuring among themselves. The Vaishya's conduct was most unusual to them. Which Aryan of a lower varna than theirs would dare to behave so confidently towards the Brahmins, and more so, while attending such an important ceremony? And his eyes! The stranger was right! They had never seen such eyes. Brilliant black, yes, yes! From those eyes emanated a god's will ... a world-will. Shiva! Excitedly the group dispersed. Some Brahmins staggered on their legs, replete from the offering left overs. A deathly fear overpowered those who had spoken with Ashoka. All of them intoned incantations and propitiatory verses and praised Shiva highly that he wished to be present at this great offering. Kullika watched them grimly and waited for Ashoka.

The Prince had gone to Sasarman. The full moon illuminated the place where he lay. Two strong Vaishyas guarded him and muttered fearfully the appropriate prayers to keep the goblins and demons at bay, which undoubtedly must be floating around in this sinful dwelling. Ashoka approached silently, and then suddenly appeared in the full light; the Vaishyas trembled. When they recognised the strange Vaishya who was present at the offering ceremony, they felt their lives had been spared. Ashoka looked at them silently. 'Back!' he roared. Aghast, the Vaishyas withdrew to the entrance of Sasarman's home.

'Stay there!' They remained there, motionless.

'Sasarman, you were reckless,' he said softly.

'Yes, Vaishya.'

'I want to save your life. I need you. You know the Brahmin courts are merciless concerning the disruption of sacrifices.'

'Lord, loosen my ties.'

Ashoka threw his cloth aside and quickly cut through the ropes.

'Who are you, Lord?'

'One day you will know. Do not defy the Brahmins as of now, and wait for my return within a few days.'

The Prince threw the cloth over his shoulders once again and approached the two guards.

‘Go home and leave Sasarman alone.’

‘Narada will be sure to get to us, Lord.’

‘Tell him Shiva does not want Sasarman to be punished.’

Looking around with fear in their eyes, the Vaishyas left. Each rustling of trees, each movement of the beam of moonlight, each cry of an animal for its mate in the night or each sound of them in a hunt for prey, roused an eerie fear in them. Ashoka walked back to Jivaka’s homestead, deep in thought, where Kullika was eagerly waiting for him.

‘May I show my guests their sleeping place?’ asked Jivaka as he stepped near.

‘May your sacrifice bear rich fruit, Jivaka,’ said Kullika.

‘Thank you, Lord. Hopefully it wasn’t disturbed by Sasarman.’

‘I know a wise Brahmin, Jivaka. Many a childless Aryan turned to him because of his great wisdom and knowledge. He spared them from a life without sons.’

‘Where does he live, Lord?’

‘Cross the Ganga where Padmavati lies, then walk through the areca palm woods and you will soon come across the hermitage of the holy Sayana. He will give you sound advice, for he is skilled in all the Vedas.’

‘On which day, at which hour, Lord?’

‘Before the new moon, when *Savitr*¹⁵, passes through Ushas’ purple gate.’

‘Thank you, Lord.’

The young Prince stretched out on his simple cot and slept. The Guru, himself enthralled in the fabulous tales, could not sleep. Which life was the Wild Prince destined for? Who was he prior to this birth? Would a god assume the life of a human being for enriching his karma? Ashoka: willpower, strength, yet unrestrained. Was he, Kullika, the guru of this Prince, or was Ashoka himself the guru, ‘the Great Guru’¹⁶, and he, poor Brahmin, merely a pupil?

Early the next morning Rohini stoked the holy fire and performed the Agni-hotra, the morning libations. With great care, she prepared the meal of which the gods were served first, brought to them by Agni, the beloved fire god. During the preparation she did not miss any of the mantras which

Jivaka had learned from the Brahmins. Jivaka had enjoyed a good education and knew by heart all the Srauta rites to bless the house. Nothing should be left out in Jivaka's house: scouring of vessel, making of clay pots, milking—how it had hurt her this morning, missing her favourite cows but she had banished her sorrow with prayers and mantras—maintaining the holy fire and all of the forty rites that a Vaishya is supposed to fulfil, each day, each month, each year. What sin could she have committed in a previous life? Narada was a learned priest: he should know! She sighed deeply; quietly she muttered a penitent prayer.

Just then Kullika comes in, and says, 'Our young hostess sighs so deeply.'

'Honoured art thou, our guest. Yes, I sigh, Lord. Not because I am discontented, not because all the rites that Jivaka wishes to be faithfully performed are too heavy for me. It is because Narada says that if our great sacrifice does not work, it is because of a great sin in a previous life. Can all those costly offerings, joyfully brought then be of no avail?'

'Gautama says that he who is purified by the forty rites, but lacks the eight good qualities, will not be united with Brahman and reach heaven.'

'What good qualities, Lord?'

'Compassion, liberality, purity, friendliness, doing good deeds and being free from hate, greed and desire. And Vasistha says: Just as the beauty of a woman does not give a blind man pleasure, so do the four Vedas, the six vedangas and the offerings, bring no blessing to those who fall short in the good qualities.'

'Narada says that only the offerings, if brought properly, have power; all the rest is the talk of heretics. A Vaishya would do better to shut his ears to such sinful thoughts. Are you also a Brahmin, Lord?'

'Surely, Rohini, but Sayana is the wisest Brahmin I know. Let Jivaka seek his counsel.'

Ashoka, refreshed by deep sleep, greeted Rohini now as well.

'Shall we return to Pataliputra, my Guru?'

'As you wish, Lord.'



3

THE EMPEROR'S DECISION

On the busy King's Road that led to the Maharajah's palace, Tishia, Ashoka's younger brother, hastened, hoping to meet his brother and Guru along the way.

'Ashoka, messengers from Taxila¹ report of a revolt in the far-west region of Father's kingdom.'

'May the gods have mercy on the wretches, Tishia.'

'Surely, they will not, Ashoka, for these people live on the other side of the Sarasvati. Our Guru tells us they are accursed. Within a few days the army will be sent to punish them.'

'I am not surprised that something is brewing there. The *Yavanas*² are always instigating rebellion and many half-wild tribes live there. Father will dispatch them to Yama, I fear. What say you, my Kullika?'

'To be born in those unholy regions is not good fortune.'

At the palace, Ashoka quickly made his way to the *Anthapura*, the ladies' quarters of the royal harem.

'You are back early, my son,' Subhadraangi, his mother, queried. She was a Brahmin lady with refined features and keen, bright, lively eyes that

strongly contrasted with her calm and composed bearing, inspiring trust in those around her.

‘Yes, my Mother. Have you already heard of the Taxilan uprising?’

Gopali, Sumana’s mother, joined the conversation.

‘Sumana will surely subjugate the rebels.’

‘In that event the Prince will need a couple of Brahmins with him,’ commented Subhadraangi sharply, ‘to keep him enlightened about the gods’ wishes.’

‘Are there no *Nagas*³ and *Dasyus*⁴, Subhadraangi?’ scoffed Hara. ‘I fear that Prince Sumana will not survive.’

‘We know, Subhadraangi, that you prefer another to deputise for His Grace. And Hara remains loyal in echoing your wishes. But Sumana is the eldest son, the Crown Prince. Even Varuna cannot change that.’

With a haughty gesture, Gopali rose and left the room. Only then did the storm of remarks over Sumana break loose. The Maharajah could just as well have Sumana remain in the capital, as long as his gurus were sent in his place. They would do well to send the ten fairest court dancers with him, else he may stay behind with the Kosalis’ daughters, the finest of India’s women.

‘It would be better if the Maharajah were to send Ashoka,’ Hara, Bindusara’s youngest wife, mused aloud.

‘Then the rebels will take to their heels straightaway,’ sneered Jalini. She was Bindusara’s most beautiful yet least respected Rani.

Ashoka watched her silently. Jalini blushed and looked away.

‘It would not be to your advantage either, Jalini, if Sumana were sent away,’ snapped Hara. It was whispered about in the women’s quarters that Sumana occasionally paid her nocturnal visits.

In the Council Hall, Emperor Bindusara discussed the revolt with his ministers and advisors. Earlier, he had had the Purohita light the sacred fire and the prayers chanted. After the elaborate rituals were over, his astrologer opined that the revolt in Taxila appeared dangerous and only forceful action would save the situation.

‘Taxila is a turbulent city. It lies too close to Bactria and Iran. I fear the Macedonian’s successors are involved. What do you think, Aruni?’

‘Let them feel the mighty hand of the Mauryas, Your Grace!’

The others agreed.

‘And who shall lead the army, Udra?’

‘Sumana is the eldest, Your Grace.’

‘Sumana is neither self-reliant nor brave.’

‘Older and wiser advisors could be sent along to lead him in wisdom and power.’

‘Who can command an army skilfully when he depends solely on his advisors?’

‘Sumana is the Crown Prince, Your Grace. It is his right to be chosen,’ volunteered Arada, a fanatical Brahmin.

‘The right of choosing the Crown Prince is mine and I shall determine who will be the Crown Prince, Arada,’ corrected Bindusara sharply. ‘And I think it is better that Subhadrangi’s eldest son takes on the leadership of the army.’

‘And if he succeeds, Your Grace? The victor and the vanquishing army stand in the Punjab, the victor who will not be the successor? That has happened before, O Maharajah. The Nandas have felt its weight.’⁵

Bindusara shifted uneasily on his throne.

‘You forget, Arada that my father, Chandragupta, acted as an independent commander of his own army, and not at the behest of a ruling king.’

‘Still, even with a ruling Maharajah, an eager Prince, lucky in battle, can become dangerous. How did Ajatashatru⁶ become king?’

The recollection of this patricide left a deep impression. Bindusara sat motionless on his throne and pondered.

Khallataka, the most senior and highly respected minister, finally offered his counsel:

‘Sumana is the eldest Prince but he has not yet realised the importance of kingship. But why should he not make a good king? He highly respects the Vedas and our laws. Can we also say this of Ashoka?’

‘No one has said that he does not respect them. But a commander cannot subdue a revolt with Vedas and the laws.’

‘And an army, Your Grace!’

‘The question is whether Sumana can lead an army. He who goes west must be able to concentrate on the task at hand, and not be open to distractions of a personal nature. Although he is the eldest, Sumana has not

yet shown any interest in the army, weapons or the practice thereof, nor in the horses, elephants, or governance of the empire!’

‘But only because he is your eldest son, O Emperor.’

‘I shall send whom I consider most suitable. The *Arthashastra*⁷ gives me alone the right to do so. Go and bring Sumana’s guru, Jala.’

With great respect Vidu came up to the nobles.

‘Arise, Vidu. In your opinion, who must command the army to Taxila? You, better than anyone, know my eldest son.’

‘You ask my opinion, O Maharajah. Your Grace has instructed me to guide Prince Sumana. He is the Crown Prince. Kautilya says that the governing of the empire must be acknowledged as being the privilege of the eldest son. Prince Sumana then, must also become the commander of the army.’

‘I am as equally well versed in the *Arthashastra* as you, Vidu. Do you think he is capable of bringing this task to a successful end?’

‘There are a great many men in Maharajah Bindusara’s court who could advise the Prince.’

‘Advisors, advisors! I am not sending advisors to Taxila, but an army and a commander. And what if I send him without advisors?’

‘Then the responsibility lies with you, O Maharajah.’

‘Do the Mauryas rule and lead armies, or do the advisors?’

‘Sumana is wise enough to seek good advice.’

‘You prevaricate, Vidu. I do not ask about the skill of the advisors but that of my son. You may go. Bring Kullika, Jala.’

Kullika entered quietly.

‘Who is to be commander, my Kullika?’

‘According to the laws of the land, the choice is entirely yours, O Maharajah. Your wisdom assures a sound decision.’

‘Tell me what you think.’

‘Forgive me, O Maharajah, for quoting Kautilya. The *Arthashastra* says: When he, who is the Maharajah, has a son who stands in the forefront, capable of showing courage, entrust to him the position of a commander or Crown Prince.’

‘Who is that son?’

‘Ashoka, O Maharajah.’

‘The Wild Prince?’

‘The wildness springs from his life’s energy, bubbling stronger than Rudra’s *Maruts*⁸ in the rainy season.’

‘Those kinds are often brought down by women,’ answered the Emperor, who guessed Kullika’s reply, but wanted his Council to hear.

‘Prince Ashoka has shown little interest in women till now. Perhaps, to his good, he does not easily attract women, whose love usually goes to beauty, combined with power and riches.’

‘Carousing, gaming?’

‘They do not tempt him.’

‘The hunt?’

‘Which great king did not cherish the hunt?’

‘And when he has brought Taxila to heel, and returns with the conquering army to Pataliputra, his ambition abundantly fed, like Jambudvipa after the rains, who will then restrain this unbridled Prince in his delusion?’

‘There is only one he honours with deep respect: the holy Maharajah.’

Bindusara pondered deeply, no one stirred. Kullika respectfully remained silent.

‘Which of the counsellors will he need?’

‘None. He has the spirit of Shiva, the keenness of *Ganesha*⁹, and life will teach him wisdom to which he is as receptive as the blue lotus to Surya’s rays.’

‘Your favourable judgement is influenced by your love for your pupil, my Kullika.’

‘My love is only for the one who values wisdom higher than pleasures and mere form, O Maharajah.’

‘And if advisors are still sent along with him?’

‘He allows paths to be indicated, but will choose his own way.’

‘Is your testimony the truth? Free of personal desires?’

‘It is as true as an honest witness before the court of Brahma, as true as Prince Ashoka himself, O gracious Maharajah. Yet, it is not wholly free of personal desires, as I truly wish that he be chosen.’

Bindusara tried to fathom his mind, observing him keenly.

‘You may go, Kullika.’

‘Allow me one remark, O Maharajah,’ began Khallataka. ‘Those who do not respect form will not respect the existing laws of the land which are part of it. Hence, Your Grace will be dependent on the whims of a passionate conqueror.’

‘In the other case, on the whims or ... interests of the advisors,’ Bindusara’s answered sharply. Khallataka acquiesced. He knew only too well the Maharajah was right.

‘No word of this meeting is to be repeated. On this, I adjourn this council.’

All prostrated before the Maharajah with reverence, in recognition of his supreme power. The Emperor rose from the ivory throne and left the room.

‘Have you let anyone come near, Jala?’

‘No one, not even a crow or a parrot, O Maharajah.’

The Emperor retired to his private quarters. There he summoned Girika, the spy.

‘Well, Girika, what have you learned?’

‘The Prince and his guru walked along the road to Gaya and were caught in a storm; the Prince, dressed in the borrowed cloth of a Vaishya, witnessed a sacrificial ceremony held for the Vaishya Jivaka who has no sons, visited another Vaishya who played a viol, singing Veda texts and later disturbed the ceremony, which caused him to be bound in restraint by the other Vaishyas. The Prince cut the binding ropes and gave him back his freedom, saying he should no longer antagonise the Brahmins. Afterwards, the Prince and his guru spent the night in the house of the sacrificer and have today returned to Pataliputra. I passed by them several times. The guru spoke about the secret doctrine and the Upanishads.’

‘Where was the Prince during the storm?’

‘Atop the Barren Mountain.’

‘At the top?’

‘Yes, O Maharajah. The guru tried to persuade the Prince to move away from that dangerous place. Seemingly, he did not hear but looked straight ahead under pouring rain and crashing thunderclaps, motionless, until the storm subsided.’

‘Follow him closely today as well.’ After a pause, he instructed another: ‘Maskarin. What have you learned?’

‘Yesterday, Prince Sumana, in the company of other young ones, visited the hetaira, Prakriti. They played games and drank heavily. The Prince spent the night in Prakriti’s house, returning this morning to attend his guru’s lessons. At the moment he is enjoying himself in the park.’

‘Go to the park, Maskarin.’

‘Has Sayana arrived, Sari?’

‘Yes, O Maharajah. He awaits your orders.’

‘Let him enter.’

After reverentially greeting the king, the sage was led to a seat of honour.

‘How is it in the hermitage, my Sayana?’

‘One day is like another, O Maharajah. We only need care about food for the soul. The prosperity of your vast kingdom eases our ability to acquire a simple meal. And the Vaishyas increase their well-being by giving alms to the hermits.’

Bindusara described his dilemma to Sayana: Gopali’s or Subhadrangi’s son, who ought to command the army?

‘The gurus, whom I made bold to recommend to Your Majesty, were instructed to send the Princes to me, as you had requested. Sumana has come to me on several occasions. He is someone with no opinions of his own, except those regarding his personal pleasure. For the rest he willingly does, whatever the Brahmins of the Brahmin-court suggest. For the time being, Prince Ashoka does not wish to visit with me.’

‘Why not?’

‘According to Kullika, the Prince feels that he is not yet proficient enough to discuss with me the Vedas and the *Arthashastra* of Kautiliya, your Father’s great minister. Moreover, he has no desire, as Kullika already provides him all that he requires. Lastly, he has no time to spend in leisure at the hermitage. Kullika keeps me informed regularly of his work, and often asks my counsel.’

‘They call him the Wild Prince.’

‘I know this, O Maharajah. The young want to rage: be it in pleasure, or in strength, or in the irresistible craving for knowledge. Disastrous is the first, fortunate the second, blessed is he who chooses the last.’

‘You are aware of the danger that threatens all kings, even from their sons, my Sayana. Maharajah Ajatasatru killed his father; Ajatasatru’s son,

in turn, killed him; and his son was guilty of the same crime.'

'Sumana is not a threat to you but those who lead him are.'

'And who will be victorious in the West?'

'For Sumana, it would depend on his counsel.'

'I do not wish to be dependent on that!' He takes a pause and then asks:
'Ashoka?'

'It would be a drastic decision, O Maharajah. Kautiliya says that except upon the occurrence of a crisis, the privilege of being a ruler should be recognised as the eldest son's.'

'That crisis is at hand. But then, Kautiliya also says: If the king has a son who stands in the forefront, capable of showing courage: entrust to him the position of a commander or a Crown Prince.'

'Ashoka is not loved by the Brahmins, Your Grace.'

'Why not, my Sayana, why not?'

'He acts on his own judgement and conviction.'

'This, for me, is precisely the reason to appoint him, if I can be sure of his devotion. Find out about his feelings for me and to the emperorship. To you alone can I entrust this, my Sayana, you whom I revere as the wisest in my kingdom.'

'Ashoka has never entered my hermitage, O Maharajah.'

'It is a precondition if I am to appoint him.'

'Obedience to the great Emperor of Magadha and the welfare of India compel me to accept your order, O Maharajah.' Sayana departed.

'Where have my ministers gone, Bhava?'

'The Minister Udra has walked home with Arada. Minister Aruni took a bath. Kala returned to his own palace as did minister Khallataka.'

'Who watches over Udra and Arada?'

'Samudra, gracious Maharajah.'

'In the first part of the night, I will want to know what they have discussed in Arada's home.'

Bindusara continued to receive various messengers. He then left for the ladies' quarters after his trusted guards had thoroughly searched the rooms of the queens. After all, might is retained only if one is wisely cautious.

Subhadraangi was very excited but took care to conceal it from Bindusara.

‘Who will you send to Taxila, my Lord, as the commander of the forces?’

‘I have not yet made a decision, my dear Subhadra. Do not allow affairs of the State to disturb your lovely repose.’

‘You know as well as I do what is at stake. Do you dare to entrust Gopali’s son with such an important task?’

‘We shall try to be wise in our choice.’

‘You have told me many times that Ashoka has all the qualities to be a king. Or, do you say this only to flatter me, Lord? You know better than I that Sumana lives to enjoy his pleasures. Were it not for your statesmanship, which binds your infinite kingdom as lianas do the jungle, your flowering kingdom would fall apart. Do you wish to hand it to someone who merely longs for women, drink and gambling, and has no will but that of his counsels? What will become of India, what of its many peoples?’

‘I am glad to hear, my Rani, that you, like me, have concern for the welfare of my kingdom. If this is your motivation, my unsurpassed queen, you will approve of my decision. Just wait. Where may I find your eldest son?’

‘He has gone to the army camp to develop his strength and powers by doing exercises. He relates health of mind to health of the body, O Maharajah. I thank Shiva that he bestowed upon you a son like Ashoka, spawned by your power from my body.’

The Maharajah strode through the gallery of pillars and bid a slave to open the door of Gopali’s chamber. A maiden guard responsible for the royal’s safety stood in a niche. She bowed her head to the floor, indicating she had found everything in order. Gopali greeted the Maharajah with submissiveness, her face taut with tension, her eyes—filled with anticipation—looking up at the Emperor.

‘Why do you look so dejected, my proud Rani?’

‘Lord, the ladies in the anthapura presume that my son will not command the forces.’

‘Women should not interfere in matters of governance.’

‘Is Sumana the Crown Prince, Lord?’

‘I appoint the Crown Prince, Gopali-of-the-lotus eyes. Sumana is my eldest son. If he possesses the qualities of a ruler, then he shall be Crown Prince. If he does not, I shall have to seek another.’

‘Subhadraangi’s ugly son already believes he can become the ruler of India,’ Gopali burst out angrily.

‘Is he ugly in appearance or ugly in his soul, my Gopali? The former would scare the women of my kingdom, the latter, me, the present ruler of India’s peoples.’

‘I do not know his soul, but they call him the ‘Wild Prince’. He is as reticent as the stone bull in Shiva’s temple. Sumana, with his fine beauty, has the dignity of a monarch; the gurus praise him for his obedience and his many offerings. He honours the Brahmins like they were gods. He recoils in horror from the Shudra. He fears his Father as the elephant fears the mahout. Can you ask more of a Crown Prince?’

‘Your judgement is strikingly right, my beautiful Rani. What does Jalini say of him?’

Embarrassment overwhelmed Gopali. With anxious looks, she sought for what the eyes of the Maharajah would reveal to her.

‘Jalini may judge my son for herself, if you wish, O Maharajah.’

‘Where is your son at this moment, my Gopali?’

‘He is in the park enjoying the company of the Princesses and their friends, Lord,’ said the Rani with hesitation.

‘A Prince who lays claims to the throne must labour, my Gopali. He rests at night; did our son rest last night? During sleep, a Prince— and especially a Crown Prince—gathers his strength needed for the earnest tasks of the day.’

Gopali turned her face away. What did the Maharajah know? What did he not know! She thought bitterly. She had tried carefully to conceal all that the Maharajah denounced in her son, but to no avail. He seemed to always know everything.

‘Even a Crown Prince is allowed some pleasures, O Lord.’

‘Those befitting the occasion, most assuredly! May Varuna bless you, my dear Rani. My work calls me once again.’

The royal elephant awaited the Maharajah at the palace gateway. Armed maidens, who were sentries, stood in anticipation of their Lord’s arrival. The sound of a heavy gong announced his approach. Immediately, slender young girls stepped up and helped the mighty ruler to his mount. Long white cloths, adorned with yellow and the blue colours of the peacock, were draped over the elephant’s massive body. Over it was the caparison,

embellished elaborately with gold and inlaid richly with rows of gemstones, which had flowed into the monarch's treasury from every region of the vast empire. The mahout sat over the neck of the animal, his hook in his hand, face and body motionless, waiting for his Lord. Two soldiers led the animal. Leaning back in his purple *howdah*¹⁰, brilliant with glistening gemstones, Bindusara rode between rows of mounted horsemen who cleared the way. The people had gathered to catch a glimpse of the revered Maharajah: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Pataliputra's artisans and palace officers, women and children. Flowers were strewn on the path before him, and the people fell prostrate before him, he who ruled Magadha righteously. Each was convinced of Bindusara's divinity; after all, how else would he be born to such might in this incarnation?

With stateliness, the royal elephant trod ahead. Strong bodyguards accompanied the Emperor to the army camp on the banks of the Hyranyavaha, the Son ...



4

THE GANDIVA BOW

Ashoka, along with Kullika, had proceeded to the army camp way ahead of his father. The guru was more a friend to Ashoka than tutor. They rode on at a gallop. The Wild Prince was watched with timid respect. Brahmins spoke earnestly of the worry he caused the Maharajah, Kshatriyas of his unmatched skill with weapons. He was a true descendant of Chandragupta, the fearless, who did not spare anyone. The one who, under the reign of the Nandas, incited a revolt in Pataliputra but had to flee when the conspiracy was uncovered. He who had met Alexander the Macedonian¹, and after this conqueror's death, recaptured the West, thereafter took Madhyadesa, and then the throne of Magadha. No wonder, that the Crown Prince feared the ugly Prince with those dark, sparkling eyes in such an unsightly face.

As they rode on, Ashoka suddenly saw a man crossing the road, wearing the robe of a penitent and carrying a heavy rod. He observed—as little has ever escaped the notice of the young Prince—that they were soon bound to cross paths. To his surprise, the ascetic kept walking on and just as they were about to collide, the man dropped to the ground and threw the rod between the horse's legs. The animal stumbled and fell to the ground. Ashoka was flung high up into the air and, just as he was about to fall on the ground, he was caught by a Shudra who had rushed to the spot. With his

skill and adroitness, he had protected Ashoka from what could have been a bad and dangerous fall. As a result of the Shudra's action, he fell, seriously bruising himself. Ashoka was not shaken in the least. He landed on his feet, jumped upon the penitent, and grabbed him by his neck.

‘Why that rod, wretch?’

‘It was an accident, Lord.’

‘You lie, you saw us coming.’

‘Lord, I swear that I meant no harm.’

Ashoka summoned some of the soldiers and gave a stern instruction: ‘Take him to the rack.’ He then turned to the Shudra and said, ‘And you, Shudra, enter my service as a special guard. What is your name?’

‘Revata, Lord.’

‘Revata, I will expect you tomorrow in the park at sunrise, when Ushas opens the gate for Surya.’

The ascetic moaned loudly when the soldiers carried him away. In front of the courthouse and its devices for torture, he cried out:

‘Cursed ... Lamba ...’

‘Who is Lamba?’

‘The door-keeper of the *ganika*² Prakriti, Lord,’ he stuttered.

‘Get Lamba from Prakriti's house!’

Soon, Lamba arrived at the courthouse.

‘Why have you sent this wretch to me?’

‘I have not done so, Lord. The liar is trying to clear himself.’ said Lamba, calmly. Lamba feared neither *Mara*³ nor his demons, and being protected by the Crown Prince, felt himself safe from Ashoka.

‘Take him to the racks as well.’

Lamba blanched.

‘Why have you sent this wretch to me?’

‘Lord, he lies.’

‘Start the punishment!’

Lamba submitted to the torturers for a while and then cried out:

‘Stop it!’

‘Continue.’ ordered Ashoka calmly.

‘Lord, Prakriti ...’

‘Prakriti does not know me. Continue!’

‘Lord, the friends of Prince Sumana!’

‘Continue the punishment! With the whips now!’

Bellowing with pain, Lamba called out: ‘Stop! I shall speak. Let the others leave, then I will talk.’

‘Kullika stays. I wish to have a witness.’

‘Agreed. Lord, Prince Sumana offered me a large sum if I wounded you. Nothing more. I hired this magician, Lord.’

Ashoka angrily grabbed the iron rod and struck the magician in his rage.

‘Lock up Lamba! King Bindusara will judge him. Come, my Guru.’

Ashoka and Kullika then rode to the army camp. Two well-known charioteers were racing their three-spans on the practice fields. The one who lagged behind was lashing his horses mercilessly but was unable to overtake his opponent.

‘Beatings deliver results with people, not with animals, Sela!’ Ashoka called out. ‘Come here, I shall drive your chariot,’

Kullika tried to persuade the Prince not to risk such an unaccustomed experiment.

‘Do not be afraid, my Guru. I ride as well as Sela, only in a different manner.’ He stepped up to the horses, gave each a piece of crystallised honey, and patted the necks of the snorting animals while whispering to them soothing words. He then took the reins and climbed into the chariot. Some thought that the Prince whispered magic spells from the *Atharva Veda* into the horses’ ears. Kullika was compelled to think of Shiva. ‘If ... he ...’

‘Ready, Sagka, now us! A hundred *panas* if you win.’

The horses plunged forward and Ashoka quickly left Sagka far behind. Cheers rang out. When they stepped down from their chariots, Sagka bowed deeply to the Prince.

‘There, Sagka, a hundred *panas*. Treat your friends. Here are your beautiful horses, Sela.’

Kullika looked at his pupil, first with fear, then with amazement. He then noticed the calm look with which the Prince controlled his animals, how all the soldiers greeted the ‘Wild Prince’ with respect. That was only natural, he thought. They experienced Bindusara as a god, but Ashoka as a soldier, only higher placed, more clever than themselves, who always knew, where they failed. This was felt even more strongly in the elephant park where a mahout was savagely mistreating one of the animals because it

refused to pull a large cart which made a terrible din when it moved. In violent fear of the strange sounds, the elephant paced back and forth before the cart.

Ashoka snatched the hook out of the mahout's hand and threw it away. Then he approached the animal and trustingly put his arm around its trunk.

‘Unfasten the animal!’

‘Come,’ Ashoka gently led the elephant to the side.

‘Now, yoke an experienced elephant to the cart and ride back and forth a while.’ The mahout silently obeyed Ashoka's orders. The frightened animal flinched at first but Ashoka remained calmly by its side, giving it a sugar cube every now and then. Slowly, the animal became used to the frightening noises of the cart. Finally, he was once again yoked to the cart and Ashoka led him for a while. The elephant no longer shrank, but strode forward as if it had always been used to the simulated war-like sounds.

‘Use the intellect of the elephant as well as its power; an elephant has more manas in the tip of its trunk than a *karnak*⁴ in his head and hook together.’ The mahout fell at Ashoka's feet. They then went onwards.

‘How do you know these things, O, Prince?’

‘I know the animals better than they do, my Guru, because I love them, more than even most of my brothers. They are innocent and blameless.’

Ashoka rode to the camp of the foot-soldiers. Here again, he was greeted with cheers. He was greatly respected by the rough, brawny warriors because of the seriousness with which he practised all their weaponry. In strength, agility and total control of his muscles, he outdid them all.

A heavy gong-stroke thundered through the army camp. The Maharajah was approaching! It was time for Bindusara's daily inspection, which he never passed up unless it was impossible. In an instant the camp was galvanised into action. Soldiers rushed to their places. Thousands stood along the way as the stately procession made its way between the ranks of the now orderly and attentive warriors. Bindusara halted as he reached the spot where the Prince stood. Ashoka approached his father and greeted him with reverence.

‘My son, why do you practise so intently?’

‘That is not easy to answer, my Father. I cannot bear a life without action. I must keep moving and I love to put my body to the test. But also, I

want to know what kind of powers are at work in the great Mauryan empire.'

'Why does my son want to know that?'

'It could be possible that another Maurya may not be able to rule your empire when called upon. And then maybe, I shall have to, or want to.'

The Maharajah pondered for a moment. Then he suddenly said: 'Let the great *Gandiva*⁵ be brought. It was a bow as Arjuna received as a gift from Varuna. He who is able to arch this bow and shoot the arrow can also rule Indra's empire.'

Ashoka knew well the legend that said: 'Shall rule Indra's empire.'

He understood that Bindusara did not want to be bound by this test, yet that he sought some support in his wavering. The bow, brought here by Chandragupta, was kept with great care in the Emperor's personal armoury. When the sacred relic was brought, on Bindusara's command it was handed over to Ashoka. The Prince turned it round and round. He felt some timidity. Who could arch such an enormous bow! He thought no longer of the far-reaching implication that the Emperor would attribute to his shot. It became a question of being either able or not, mixed with great curiosity. He pulled the string, but now to flex it all the way? The gathered crowd looked on, speechless. No-one doubted the serious implications of this test: the sacred bow, the most honoured, powerful Emperor of all Aryavarta⁶, the 'Wild Prince'! In spite of enormous effort, the strong young man did not succeed in drawing the bow. Then, excitedly, he called out: 'Two heavy rocks!' He placed the stones against the ends of the Gandiva, picked up the string, fiercely stomped on the unyielding wood right in the middle, at the same time pulling the string with all his might, he stretched it, and drew with success! The jubilant cheers of the soldiers around him shook him out of his sharply focused mind. As he looked on, Bindusara had held his breath. Only now that Ashoka had succeeded did it dawn on him how risky this test had been.

'What shall I shoot, my Father?'

'Take a condemned thief or murderer. Which spell from the Artharva Veda has given my son the strength to arch the Gandiwa?'

'Spell? None, my Father! Neither shall I kill anyone who has not shown himself to be my enemy or my Father's.'

'Yonder is a target. Shoot! Settle the distance yourself.'

Amidst shouts of ‘Shiva!’ the heavy arrow flew straight and true to hit the target in the middle.

‘That was a masterly shot, my son! Which weapon are you most fond of, follower of the great Arjuna?’

‘The *chakra*⁷, my Father. What target and what distance do you want?’

But the Maharajah, still stunned by Ashoka’s mastery over the Gandiva, did not wish for further proof of Ashoka’s skills in weaponry.

‘Any throw of the *chakra* is allowed to you, my son. My time is up. My work awaits me. Come to me in the second half of the night.’

Ashoka remained standing, deep in thought. Kullika finally remarked: ‘It is time, O, Prince.’

‘The Maharajah’s words were careless, my Guru. Suppose, I had chosen Sumana as the target ... I hate him.’

Kullika grew pale. ‘That is a terrible thought, O, Prince!’

‘That is why I tell you, my Guru. For now it has lost its power. Although acting on it would bring me great advantage. Any throw of the *chakra* is allowed to you.’

‘These thoughts are dangerous, O, Prince. Come with me to the wise Sayana.’

‘Very well! My thoughts are confused. Perhaps, I am in need of his advice.’

They rode directly to Padmavati, from where they were taken across the Ganga. The river was still in spate. Riding through an areca palm grove, they reached the hermitage of the wise Brahmin: a dwelling made of bamboo and timber with a sun-sheltered verandah. Sayana was seated, a manuscript on palm-leaves before him, meditating. He first had completed the first two stages of life: Brahmacharin, the student, and Grihastha, the house-holder. He then had chosen to take Vanaprastha and settled in the hermitage, along with a few other Brahmins, to continue his further life in solitude, reflecting over the *Atma-vidya*⁸, the well-being of soul and mind of others and himself. Bindusara frequently sought his wise counsel. From afar, Sayana saw Kullika approaching with a young man and understood that it was Prince Ashoka who accompanied him. He immediately stood up and warmly welcomed both guests.

‘Have we disturbed your contemplations, my Sayana?’

‘You, Kullika, are always welcome, and I am especially pleased to be able to welcome your pupil.’

After a cordial greeting, Kullika remarked: ‘Prince Ashoka would like to speak with you, my Sayana, since his mind seeks answers about his karma.’ Kullika now related the incident of Lamba and also about the Gandiva.

‘Is it so tempting to you, O, Prince, the ruler-ship of a great empire? Continuously in fear of every enemy, both inside and outside your kingdom, inside and outside the palace even? Of what benefit is all this wealth, this power, this fame, with its inherent risk of imperiling your karma should you not make good use of your wealth, your power, the application of the laws which exists amongst the many peoples.’

‘Or, ennoble my karma with the right use of my power, O, wise Sayana.’

Sayana looked at him, surprised, and said, ‘That certainly is the other possibility.’

‘Emperor Bindusara is a powerful monarch, and prosperity flourishes in long fragrant bunches from the empire’s tree. Shiva and Varuna may be merciful to him but if Sumana becomes the King of Magadha, it will be the end of the Mauryas. I could not endure that, O, wise Sayana! Must the lives, prosperity and happiness of an empire be entrusted to a womaniser and an instrument of the Brahmins, a gambler, an assassin? Will the House of the Peacock⁹ end or fall with such a king? I do not want that!’

‘And your Father, Bindusara?’

‘As long as he is the Maharajah, I will obey him. But no assassin on the throne of Magadha! Believe me, O Sayana, I am not sure of myself, whether I hate Sumana because of his attempt on my life, his behaviour, unworthy of a Crown Prince? Or, because he stands in my way.’

‘No man, O Prince, acts upon a single thought. Suppose, your Father, not your brother, embodied the four negative characteristics you named. Would you hate him?’

‘It is impossible to answer this, O, wise Sayana; to Emperor Bindusara, everything—yes, everything—comes second to the welfare of the people, the kingdom and the house of the Mauryas.’

‘Your answer is less philosophical than practical. Nevertheless, assume it be so.’

‘Yes, then I would hate him.’

‘Would you also kill him—for that was your first thought when you held the chakra in your hand—and then ascend the ivory throne, just as many kings before you have done?’

‘No, because he is my Father.’

‘But Sumana is your brother.’

‘Half-brother! He is yet to be the Maharajah and truly has the traits I spoke of.’

‘Once again: you answer practically, not philosophically. So, your brother.’

‘The Maharajah carelessly permitted me any throw of the chakra. No honourable king would break such a promise. I could, therefore, kill him. I told Kullika, once I had voiced the thought it lost its force.’

‘But if your Father placed him on the throne of Magadha?’

‘I would vehemently resist. I would not allow this peaceful, prosperous land to be taken over by an unsuitable king, even if he is my brother. I am convinced that I, not he, should be the king.’

‘Is that not haughtiness?’

‘No, O, wise Sayana. Perhaps, I have carried this conviction from an earlier incarnation. Emperor Bindusara needs a commander to go to Taxila. I know I should be the one, for if the Maharajah sends Sumana, it will be the judgement of his Brahmin advisors which will prevail, and not his.’

‘You know, O, Prince: I too am a Brahmin and could prize that in Sumana.’

‘If your opinion can be so ruled by the interests of your varna, it would be of little value to me, O, Sayana, and my visit to your recluse be in vain.’

Sayana smiled.

‘And, if he sends you, my Prince?’

‘I myself will judge and decide.’

Sayana nodded.

‘Return to Pataliputra, and trust that a righteous king, in this case will be righteous as well.’

‘May I ask the wise Sayana a question?’

‘As many as you ask, the better.’

‘Does the success of a sacrifice depend on what is paid for it?’

‘Those who have profited say so.’

‘That answer is more philosophical than practical, my revered Sayana. Naturally, I wanted your opinion.’ Sayana laughed warmly at his perceptiveness.

‘I have taken vanaprastha, my Ashoka. As a pupil I served my guru, studied in Taxila, raised a family, and offered sacrifice upon sacrifice. Now I know that a genuine offering should be merely symbolical. Shiva is the Lord of knowledge. When you acquire knowledge, inner knowledge, is that an offering to Shiva. Shiva is the Lord of destruction. When you kill, you offer to Shiva. But Shiva is also the Lord of life. Thus, you must learn, when to kill, and when to bestow life, so that the offering will be acceptable; because the offering comes from within.’

‘But millions in my Father’s great empire sacrifice animals, build altars and pay with their precious offerings to the Brahmins!’

‘He, who does not understand symbols, offers animals and worldly possessions. But that offering will never liberate him from having to come back to earth to purify his karma. He who understands that Brahman is within himself and experiences in wisdom that we are all one with, it will be liberated from this existence.’

‘Why must one be liberated?’

‘Because the world is maya, delusion, beguiling. Those who are aware of this know that there is no need for animal sacrifice. Gaining knowledge is their way of making an offering.’

Ashoka stared intently ahead for some time.

‘But mankind will need a long time yet to be convinced of this wisdom,’ added Sayana.

‘Mankind will need a long time to break free of those who profit by this delusion!’ replied Ashoka sharply.

‘It will never break free of this, because acquiring profound knowledge is difficult and making offerings is easy, and thus human. This state is rooted in both the greed and laziness of the average person.’

‘You believe then that animals must be snuffed out, soma-offerings brought and heavy prices paid for them, forevermore?’

‘Whether they must, you already understand my view. Will it happen? See here, my resolute Ashoka: As long as there are people who approach

the gods with greedy hearts there will be priests with greedy hearts to receive them.'

This thought took deep root in Ashoka and would often determine his actions; many years of reflection suddenly took shape.

Sayana joined them on their way back. In Pataliputra, he announced himself to the Maharajah and told him what he had heard.

In the second half of the night, Ashoka entered the Maharajah's quarters. The Maharajah said: 'Sit down, my son, I wish to speak to you. I have decided that you will lead the campaign to Taxila.'

Ashoka, deeply moved, bowed and touched his forehead to the hem of his Father's robe.

'You understand what this means. That I pass over my eldest son in favour of his younger brother. It is an important assignment, my Ashoka. Try to arrange matters in Taxila in the best way. The way in which you handle this may have consequences on your future as well as that of India. How many soldiers will you need?'

'As few as possible, my Father.'

'As few ... as possible?'

'Yes, a small force can move more quickly. Furthermore, the Iranians and those who conspire with them are probably the cause of the uprising. So, the residents of Taxila are, by and large, blameless. I would think it should not be difficult to come to some agreement with them.'

'But you will have to mete out very heavy punishments.'

'A wild elephant is easier calmed with a thumb-size piece of sugar than with ten large hooks.'

'They will think we fear them.'

'I expect, my Father, that they will think us the wisest. They know that the army of Bindusara, conqueror of enemies, can sweep over the entire West: Kashmira, Gandhara, Rajputana, Oudh, with Beluchistan and Bactria, and if he should thus choose, could subdue the region without any problem.'

Bindusara, impressed by this practical and wise remark, concluded that Ashoka's proposal was in total agreement with his wishes, as prompted by his apprehension. Ashoka awaited calmly his Father's decision.

‘But as an army commander, a Maurya Prince cannot arrive without an army.’

‘Then, send as many soldiers as you deem necessary to uphold the honour of the Mauryas, my Father.’

‘Prepare everything yourself. Select those you want to take along. Tomorrow evening I wait for your decision, my son, and I will hear what measures you have taken. I am joining a large hunting party tomorrow. So, I will leave it to you. A reconnaissance contingent leaves today, to pave the way, and I shall judge Lamba.’

Ashoka was startled: ‘My Father, I am sorry. How do you know about that ...?’

‘He who rules an empire as large as mine must be aware of all that is happening. I will not be at the mercy of the whim of my people, my ministers, or my family. You, too, must stay alert in Taxila. It is said you are feared, and thus, not safe. Pay careful attention to your own safety. That is imperative for kings and Princes alike, especially if they are placed in a position of trust by the Maharajah. I want to tell you now, that I have been warned from seven sides, that I am not safe from the ‘Wild Prince’.’

Startled, Ashoka stood up. ‘Who makes these threats, my Father?’

‘What does it matter if I tell you. The messengers were all subjects who were constantly kept under watch so I knew their motives immediately. I am expected to know what my enemies have in mind, and even more, what my friends wish. In Taxila you take over my task. Should you not act as I do, your life will be threatened, as is mine, but not protected.’

‘Who will threaten it, my Father?’

‘Your brother Sumana is a protégé of the Brahmins and has many friends in Pataliputra. They will not be the most charitable of people to my strongest son.’

‘Yes, my Father.’

‘Thus, select trustworthy troops. I know they revere you as a warrior and a Prince. Ensure your own safety first that is your solemn duty, you are taking my place. Think of the spells of *Atharva Veda* that guard you against assassination, poison, snakes, demons, and all that lie in wait for a king or his replacement. Keep your eyes and ears open to everything around you as the lotus does to the weather gods.’

‘Are there demons, my Father?’

‘Do you doubt that?’

‘Kullika is convinced of their presence, no doubt. But I have crossed the park at night, again and again, and nothing; the park by night is as the park by day, only Surya’s light is missing. I think that demons exist in the heads of ignorant priests and superstitious fools such as my brother Sumana. As a result of a discussion I had with Kullika, I have been thinking much about these things lately. And now I investigate thoroughly everything that does not appear credible to me. For all strange occurrences I have always been able to find a natural explanation. And against dangerous people and the dangers in nature one can always arm oneself.’

‘Form your own opinion about what life has to offer you. The Mauryas allow their people the freedom of their religious convictions, as long as they respect the laws of the country. If that were not the case, Kullika would never have been your guru.’

Ashoka reflected on this for a moment.

‘You are right, my great Father. I have never thought of this. My heart is full of gratitude for all that you have given me, especially for the freedom to seek the path I have to go.’

‘I have always been convinced that you could bear that freedom. You were born under a lucky star, so an Ajivika told me at your birth. Evil spirits were kept away from your birthing bed by all the means at your Mother’s and my disposal. Since your first hour, she has watched and guided you faithfully. Kullika was her choice, after having first consulted with Sayana. So, thank her. I must go now.’

Ashoka fell once again to his Father’s feet and once more touched the edge of his robe. Bindusara raised him up and led him to the door.



THE THROW OF THE CHAKRA

Ashoka's steps were slow and measured as he strolled through the hall of gilded pillars bordering the park. Still deep in thought, he continued walking till he came up to the chief palace guard who was very kindly disposed towards him. He still did not understand how his father could have been so careless: 'Any throw of the chakra ...' Sumana was not only an impediment to him, but also to the Maharajah. Phuuu! Was the coward worth a fling of the chakra? He whispered to Nata: 'When I go into the park with Prince Sumana, you walk ahead. Remember the white cloak and our plan.'

He then briskly walked over to Sumana's quarters. He would demand an explanation for the attempt on his life by Lamba and the magician, but even more he felt the need to unburden himself of the restlessness caused by his father's careless remark. He did not find the Prince. He took his sharpest chakra and waited in the hall. The air was hushed; a solitary maiden stood guard, occasionally shifting her feet; *kokilas*¹ sang in crystal tones in the sultry spring night, whirring beetles and high-pitched sounds of bats revealed the awakening of life in the stillness of night. At this hour the Maharajah received his informants, who reported to him every happening of importance in his large empire, and charged with fresh orders, were silently led away. Nothing escaped his Father's keen mind: the web of his all-

encompassing administration, invisible and strong, extended everywhere, even to the farthest corners of the empire. He demanded observance of the law, and where there was no law, his word held sway. How a single man could govern such a great multitude of people. ‘*Dandaniti*², the art of punishing!’ according to Chanakya.³ Capital punishment, if found to be fitting; yet there was security if one obeyed the will of the Emperor. Without that will, the entire edifice would crumble and Sumana lacked will. ‘A Raja, incapable of ruling his kingdom, will be shunned by his subjects like the marshy banks of rivers are by the elephants.’ Chandragupta, Bindusara ... Sumana ... midday sun and glow-worm ... Thoughts about the chakra - throw disturbed him. He no longer wanted that! He would prove to himself he did not want that. Alone in the park with that coward! The sharp chakra in his hand, with the Maharajah’s sanction to kill whom he wished, and this: ‘Know when to kill and when to bestow life.’ Those were Sayana’s words.

A great calm descended upon his soul like the white light of Chandra reflected in the lotus pond of the mysterious park. It was no ‘stealing of the throne’, the Mauryan right to the ivory throne! ‘Shiva will send him who takes upon himself onerous tasks.’ Kullika says: ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’, That Thou Art: Sumana will be wiped out as Shiva’s lightning does the *Vritra*⁴.

After waiting for a long time, he heard soft footsteps going towards Sumana’s quarters. He walked up to him calmly, almost soundlessly. Sumana halted, and warily turned around. Ashoka saw that he was taken by surprise.

‘You flinch like a scared antelope, Sumana.’

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Come, walk with me through the park. Chandra illuminates it as though it were day.’

‘I never go to the park at night. I prefer the day.’

‘And at night with Prakriti? You will come with me now!’

Sumana regarded his younger brother suspiciously. ‘If you wish to speak to me you can come with me to my quarters.’ His fear growing, Sumana wanted to slip away quickly, but Ashoka firmly held him back.

‘That I do not want! Come, brave Prince. Or, shall I get Lamba to safeguard you from plaguing demons?’

‘Why seek out danger? This is the time for evil spirits,’ ventured Sumana.

‘For good spirits as well. I have to speak to you, it does not allow for delay, so come with me.’ At last, Sumana walked nervously with Ashoka to the park. His eye had fallen upon the glistening chakra in his brother’s hand.

A white peacock, roosting on the branch of a small *tala* tree, startled him.

‘What are you looking for, here in the night?’

‘Myself. And you will help me. You look nervously at my chakra; indeed, it is dangerous! The Maharajah has allowed me a throw at any target I choose. And the Maharajah’s word is sacred. Shall I sever your confidant Lamba’s head from his torso, or another’s who stands in my way? Do not tremble so!’

A piercing and almost unearthly shriek rang out close to them; it chilled Sumana to his bones.

‘You have little presence of mind, Sumana. It is merely a peacock that is startled by our footsteps!’ But Sumana looked with wild eyes at a white figure that rose before him as if out of the earth. With a cowardly scream, he sank to his knees and reached up imploringly to the ghostly vision. Ashoka grasped him tightly and pulled him up to the ghost: a white cloak, hanging from a tree branch.

‘Where is your courage, Crown Prince?’ he mocked. As they walked on, they heard a heavy splash in the pond and cries for help.

‘Save that drowning person! Should not a Crown Prince need undaunted will?’ When the splashing became frantic, Sumana sank to the ground, moaning like a wounded deer. Then, as he heard the hissing of a snake, he jumped up and set off at a run. Ashoka quickly reached out to his prey, grabbing him by the neck and forcing him to stand still.

‘What ... do you want ... from me?’ Sumana gasped.

‘I wanted to know who is worthy of being the target of my chakra. You are not! Just one more question: Who should lead the campaign to Taxila?’

‘He, whom the Maharajah chooses, you, vulture hovering over my Father’s throne!’

Ashoka laughed. ‘Go and rest from your weariness and dream sweetly, grandson of the brave Chandragupta, son of Bindusara, conqueror of

enemies. I am going West! That was my message.'

Sumana looked at him, speechless; he then hurried on to the palace.

Ashoka listened yet to the *kokila* whose calls from the trees echoed in the moonlit park. Glorious! Even more glorious was the feeling that he had been able to control himself. 'Any throw of the chakra!' ... The coward! He put the weapon away.

But Sumana, overcome with helpless rage, could only think of exacting pitiless revenge.

At the first rays of the sun Ashoka walked to the park.

'Revata, you are on time.' The Shudra bowed deeply. 'Why did you risk your life for me?'

Revata looked inquiringly at the Prince.

'May I speak the truth, cost what it may, O, Prince?'

'I wish you would.'

'I hear as sharply as an antelope and see keener than a vulture. I often wander through the town and I know much, and because I hold my tongue, only I know what I know. Thus have I come to know that the Brahmins are a threat to you, for they wish the frivolous Prince Sumana to succeed to the throne. But I hate the Brahmins, because they preach that the Shudra is only an animal in human form. I saw how the magician had planned your accident and suspected that the Brahmins had sent him or ... Prince Sumana. I then jumped immediately to save you, O, Prince.'

'Why?'

'It is said you are just, even to the Shudras.'

'Who says this?'

'All who do not believe in the haughty delusions of the sacrificial priests, O, Prince.'

'You risk much to tell me this.'

'I was permitted to speak the truth, My Lord.'

'Revata, you will accompany me on my journey to the far West,' said Ashoka. 'But keep silent about this, and try to be of service to me.'

'I shall bring an offering to Shiva, O, Prince!'

With the discerning eye of an intelligent, strong and mentally capable young man, and his never failing interest and knowledge about everything

concerning his father's empire and army, Ashoka selected his small body of troops: he chose twenty war elephants and as many carts, all armed and manned by the most experienced soldiers, trained by himself; one hundred excellent horsemen with the best horses, and a few hundred strong and agile foot soldiers. For commanders and officers, he chose only men he personally knew and trusted. All felt honoured that Ashoka thought them worthy of this expedition. He was known to be merciless yet strictly fair. His influence over this army of brawny warriors was huge due to his unsurpassed bravery and keenness in all the details. His simplicity also endeared him to all. He spoke seldom, but when he gave his opinion, it was felt to be just. He was action itself, no effort was too much; no goal, once determined, was beyond reach. Thus began legend after legend about the Prince—nay, the Wild Prince—who could talk to elephants and horses and get them to obey him, and inspire their greatest efforts with just a few utterances which worked like magic words. He directed his arrows with his sharp eyes, his chakra struck where he wished it to cut. There was no match for his swordsmanship.

The rumour about the attempt on the Prince's life had spread like wildfire through the army camp; everyone had heard of it, yet no one was quite certain where the story originated: A magician had used his wand to cause the horse to stumble, but like a *rishi*⁵ the Prince had flown through the air and landed on a Shudra who suddenly became a Kshatriya. The horse was unhurt and his guru dropped to his knees in adoration of the Prince, and the Prince had struck down the magician with one look. With a commander like this, they would march towards victory, head on! According to Sela and Sagka, the horses whinnied with respect when they spied Ashoka, and the elephants bowed their heads and saluted in happiness, with raised trunks, when they heard his voice.

Kullika galloped up just as Ashoka had finished the selection of his troops.

'May I interrupt you, O, Prince?' he whispered. 'Sasarman has been taken prisoner this morning and sent to Pataliputra. He has been accused of disturbing a sacred offering, and has been condemned by the court to be put to death by a wild elephant. Jivaka has also just been brought to prison. Wishing to visit the wise Sayana, he has trespassed onto the imperial hunting grounds. This will cost him his life: the penalty is death.'

'We must save them both, my Guru.'

‘Sasarman cannot be saved. Perhaps, we can save Jivaka, if the merciful Emperor can be appealed to.’

‘Come with me immediately, Kullika, to the execution arena!’

They sped back on their horses to Pataliputra and arrived, flushed with heat, at the execution fields. An elephant, captured weeks ago, was held in a massive wooden stockade. This animal could not be tamed and was thus used to execute the condemned. Whoever entered the stockade would be attacked by the angry beast, gored and crushed under his feet. When the Prince and his guru approached, a hushed whisper rippled over the people who had come to see the execution. Ashoka walked to the front of the stockade. The spectators nervously parted to one side. He waited a moment and thought about simply freeing Sasarman, but just as quickly discarded this idea. A judgement of the court of Brahmins! To obstruct Brahmins in the execution of a judgement would be considered a great offence against the laws of the land. Ashoka thought it unwise to have this charge brought against him just now. A loud clamour was heard from the entrance: the Vaishya was resisting wildly. The rough guards tightened their hold on the condemned man, others opened the gateway, and Sasarman was thrown forcibly into the stockade, where his ‘executioner’ awaited him. The gate closed. The elephant trumpeted loudly, swinging its trunk high up, its small eyes glinting. With its trunk raised in self-protection, it charged towards its victim. Sasarman, pallid, stood trembling as he awaited his inevitable death. Ashoka grabbed the chakra and coolly measured the distance to the animal. The razor-sharp gleaming disc cut through the air and struck the elephant fatally behind its ear. The animal stood still, blood spurting down. A wild shriek. The mortally wounded beast staggered on its feet, took several steps back and collapsed. An extraordinary excitement came over the spectators. Many fled in fear as they felt Ashoka’s deed was an offence against the all-mighty Maharajah; others raised a deafening cheer. The Prince, followed by his guru, hurried to the stockade’s entrance.

‘Open the gate!’ The servants, aghast and shocked, flew to the heavy beamed gate and opened it wide.

‘Come, Sasarman!’

Sasarman seemed to awaken from a dream and stumbled, dumbfounded, towards the Prince and then, suddenly recognising the Vaishya who had freed him, fell reverently to the ground.

‘Stand up, Sasarman. Prince Ashoka has kept his promise. Return as quickly as you can to your homestead and wait for me. I will need you soon.’

Sasarman, looking as if a heavy burden had been lifted from him, walked quickly towards the road in the direction of Gaya.

A wild rumour quickly spread through Pataliputra, although few had really seen what happened: Prince Ashoka had killed the elephant with a lightning bolt from his eye. Many spectators had seen the fiery rays that flashed towards the elephant. With a wave of his arm, he had opened the heavy gate and let out the Vaishya who had been miraculously saved. Then, the Prince had suddenly caused the Vaishya to disappear, and no one knew where he had gone.

This latest legend about the Wild Prince soon also reached the Brahmin ministers Udra and Arana, who, because of their strong sense of varna, worked for Prince Sumana. They understood that the Crown Prince’s opportunities would be advanced by this incident. Thus Arana, with a serious face, brought up the subject immediately in the Ministers’ Council.

‘Has Your Grace heard that Prince Ashoka has violated the decision of the court, killed the execution elephant and freed a condemned Vaishya?’

‘I have heard,’ admitted the Emperor, uneasily.

‘Will the mighty Maharajah tolerate the trampling of the empire’s laws? Do you not fear, Your Most Just Majesty, the grave discontent of the people of Magadha, especially when they hear that it is this Prince who is charged with the leadership of the campaign to Taxila?’

Bindusara thought for a moment. He then summoned a servant to bid Ashoka to appear before the Ministers’ Council. As he looked at Udra and Arana’s serious faces, Ashoka understood their intentions.

‘Has my son nullified the verdict of the court?’

‘I have righted an unjust sentence, my Emperor.’

He then described the great sacrifice that Sasarman had not disturbed, as the Brahmins then present, had acknowledged themselves, and how he had merely recited verses from the *Rig Veda*.

Udra grew restless and asked:

‘Has the illustrious Prince killed the executioner elephant?’

‘Who, O Udra, is the Lord of Magadha and of all the kingdoms in Aryavarta?’

‘The merciful Maharajah Bindusara.’

‘Is his Word law?’

‘Certainly, O, Prince,’ answered Udra.

‘Can every subject of the Maharajah appeal to his Word?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I, also?’

‘Of course, O, Prince.’

‘In the army camp, the Maharajah granted me any throw of the chakra I wished. Do you know, high minister, what that Word of the sacred Maharajah means? The Council must admit that I have not misused it. Suppose, that you had been my target, or someone else?’

All the ministers now looked at the Maharajah.

Bindusara smiled almost imperceptibly. He knew that the Prince—while talking to Kullika—had referred to the Maharajah as careless. It eased his mind that Ashoka had unburdened himself of his Word this way.

‘That is true, and my Word is the Word of the anointed Emperor of Aryavarta. Each accusation against the commander of the army to Taxila is, therefore, unfounded. You may go, my son.’

‘May I ask one more mercy from my noble Father?’

‘Speak.’

‘A Vaishya, named Jivaka, has no sons in spite of many costly sacrifices. My Guru advised him to visit the sage Sayana. On his journey there, he mistakenly trespassed into the royal hunting grounds, which is punishable by death. Recently, Jivaka showed my Guru and me great hospitality. I ask you now, Your Great Majesty, mercy for this honest Vaishya.’

‘The court will carry on, my son. Afterwards, I will consider whether mercy should be granted to him.’ The Maharajah motioned him out and Ashoka left.

Later in the night, he reported to the Emperor on what and whom he had chosen for his campaign.

‘That is too minimal a force, O commander of my army.’ The Emperor watched sharply for the impression his remark made on his son, but Ashoka remained unaffected.

‘For my purpose large enough, my revered Father. Should I be compelled to wage war, then I will call upon your support.’

‘I shall increase each of the four divisions in a small way: five of my best elephants, five carts, twenty horsemen, and one hundred foot soldiers of my choice.’

Ashoka understood that his Father’s spies would be among those who were added, so that his actions could be carefully watched and reported back to the Maharajah.

‘I fully understand, my careful Father, and am delighted by his decision.’ Bindusara looked at him: Did he really understand? In any case, the response satisfied him.

‘Moreover, I am sending ten trustworthy female slaves whose duty it will be to prepare your meals and take care of your tent, my son.’

A soft smile waved over Ashoka’s features. He knew that the Maharajah had feared him. How had Ajatasatru become the king! Ashoka guessed what this ‘fatherly concern’ meant. He knew all too well the history of the royal courts of Magadha, the fear of a son, who became too dangerous for the Emperor. In any case, this approach would certainly be too simple against him!

‘I thank my Father for this attention, paid to me personally.’

It surprised Bindusara that Ashoka, who apparently understood all his actions, accepted them with such wisdom. He had always feared the wild young man. He has had him watched day in and day out. However much and often he was plagued by suspicions aroused in him by high ministers and priests, his distrust always disappeared when he spoke to Ashoka. Yet, he wished to know for certain; after all, he could not risk making mistakes!

‘Which of the advisors will you take with you?’

‘Kullika, and Sayana, if he should wish to go.’

‘No, Sayana will not go along, but Kullika is a calm and wise man.’

The Emperor stood up and embraced his son.

‘I thank the gods who gave me Ashoka as a son.’

‘And I thank Shiva, Lord of life and death, who allowed me to be born as son of Emperor Bindusara, my Father.’



ROHINI'S DESPAIR

On the second day after the sacrificial *yagna*¹, Rohini was busy carefully scouring the household vessels. The gods, who were to receive the first offerings produced, would not accept unless they were spotless. And she needed to acquire good *karma*², so that they would grant her the boon of a son that she had been wanting so dearly. Jivaka had gone to the wise Sayana. What more could she do? Jivaka was good to her, had never blamed her for not bearing a son. Could her enduring love for Sasarman be the obstacle? Could she change her soul, her body? Sasarman had made certain she would never forget him. His viola made her soul quiver with the mysterious melodies that he cajoled out of it but she would never transgress the precepts of the Brahmins or Jivaka. Never! She would rather tolerate another woman beside her, one who might bear Jivaka sons, because she had not lived so sinfully in a past life. If she, Rohini, died and were born anew, then let her karma be so virtuous that the gods could not refuse her their blessings. In her previous life, of which she knew nothing, the priests suggested that she had sinned greatly. In this life, therefore, her good deeds must exceed her shortcomings. She would make sure that she committed her whole life to this end. When would Jivaka return? What if he did not return? A widow without sons? All would be lost! No rite could save her then. The whole village would turn its back on her, because then it would be

clear how heinously she had once sinned, to have earned this worst of punishments for a woman. Sins of which she had no knowledge at all. Desperate, she stumbled on to a bench by the door of Jivaka's house. Her resilience was broken. If Jivaka did not return, she could no longer fight. That would be the last straw. If only he would come!

Pindola was one of those Brahmins to whom every spiritual task was an annoyance and every sensuous delight, the bread of life. No marriage ceremony, no sacrifice, no *namakarna*,³ no initiation of brahmacharins, nor any other feast was performed without it being brightened up by his presence. Those who needed Brahmins to purify their karma, and wanted to give alms or the left overs from the offerings to the members of the highest varna in order to propitiate the gods, found in the lusty, sensual Pindola, a willing tool. He was not permitted to serve as a sacrificial priest himself, but filling his sacred belly, being available for every feast, was his greatest pleasure. And the Vaishyas in the region had enough sense of humour to always invite the 'empty offering barrel'! The largest and best of what the sacred fire saved from the meat, cakes and soma, ended up in the stomachs of the Brahmins, anyway. And there was no more grateful guest than Pindola. He was deeply moved by both Jivaka and Rohini's willingness to make sacrifices because of their desire for a son. He had looked at the beautiful woman with pleasure, and failed to understand why the gods should refuse her the treasured favour. He had enjoyed their gifts often. He had a weakness for the simple Vaishya woman. He himself had three sons, all of them healthy. Such a shame the gods did not give this beautiful woman even one. Every Aryan knew what Brahma himself says: 'My gods are the Brahmins; I know of no others that equal you, O, Brahmins, through whose mouth I eat.' 'The universe is in the power of the gods, the gods in the power of the prayers; the prayers are in the power of the Brahmins; thus the Brahmins are our gods!'

Rohini was at fault, so everyone thought. Suppose, however, that Jivaka was the sinner from a previous birth? Pindola's wife owed her success partly to the finely ground kekisikha root and putrampjiva roots, mixed with milk from a single-coloured cow. This worked even for infertile women.

Pindola himself would bring the concoction to Rohini. He was aware that Jivaka had gone to seek the advice of the sage Sayana; he, however, knew better. He had begotten three sons.

Rohini jumped up in joy when she heard someone approaching Jivaka's house; she thought her husband was returning. When she saw she was mistaken, she shyly walked up towards Pindola.

'Jivaka is away on a journey, Lord.'

'I know, Rohini. I wish to speak to you.' His eyes rested with delight on the blossoming young woman: 'The sacrifice may have been desecrated by Sasarman's violation. I would feel it as such a pity if all your efforts were in vain. I myself had much success with my wife, using finely ground kekisikha and putrampjiva root, mixed with milk from a single-coloured cow. Do you have such a cow, Rohini?'

'Yes, Lord ...'

'Fetch the milk of that cow, then. I shall help you mix it. Drink it and your greatest wish will come true. Get it, Rohini.'

Hesitating and shy, Rohini went and came back with the milk. Pindola helped her. He sometimes lightly touched her hand, or placed his hand familiarly on her back. No movement of his face betrayed the lust that was raging inside him.

'Rohini, to me the gods were bounteous, blessing me with one son after another. If you had been my wife, there would be no question of the neighbours looking upon you with pity. The pride of a mother would stoke Agni, like flames do the sacred fire. Rohini, my remedy is infallible, at least for me. Perhaps, Jivaka lacks the strength? Poor Rohini. Look, it is ready, drink now. Lie down and rest for a while.' He put his arm around her waist and gently pushed her down. The feel of the Vaishya woman made him lose all caution and composure. Rohini resisted feebly because she hardly dared defy the holy Brahmin. Unintentionally, her grief merely goaded Pindola, who could no longer restrain himself.

'Lord, have I sinned in a previous life?'

'It is said you have, Rohini. Jivaka may also have.'

'Lord, if I must pay for what I have done in my past existence, then I do not wish to do anything in this life which would displease the gods. Then my next life might be blessed. I will strictly follow the forty sacraments of the Vaishyas.'

Amidst his excitement Pindola barely listened to Rohini's words. He threw his arms around her. A powerful repulsion came over Rohini.

‘Lord, I can no longer tolerate your touching of me. I thank you for your good advice and shall follow it, but I do not want anything that Jivaka would not want.’

‘Vaishya-woman ... you spurn a Brahmin! Do you know what you are doing? If I, a Brahmin priest, were to curse you, the gods would condemn you. Compassion for a woman without a son brought me to you.’

Rohini went pale, but nevertheless, felt the wrong of this man of the highest varna.

‘A priest is also bound by the laws,’ she stuttered. Breaking free, at last, she gasped:

‘Lord, leave now Jivaka’s house, otherwise I will have to seek refuge with the neighbours, and tell them you have been visiting me in Jivaka’s absence.’

Flushed with anger, Pindola panted angrily: ‘What will they, your neighbours believe, Rohini, that you invited me or that I ...’

Despairingly, Rohini fell to a bench. Pindola came close to her again.

‘Many a Vaishya woman would thank Varuna that a Brahmin should liberate her from a situation of the gravest incompleteness. Listen, Sasarman’s name is whispered with yours.’

‘Sasarman is finished. He has never entered Jivaka’s house.’

‘My testimony can free you.’

‘I don’t need it, Lord.’

‘Look, Rohini,’ he once again tried to put his arms around her.

A loud scream was heard in the distance. Sasarman! What did he want? What if he had lost his mind and came to look her up. Pindola would see him here ... while Jivaka was away! Fearful, her face ashen, she awaited her fate. She also heard other voices, loud, angry ... why, it was a fight! Was it possible that the Brahmins still ...? She reined in her thoughts and begged all the gods to help her and Sasarman and Jivaka. She then hastened towards the great road to Pataliputra. She wanted to flee Pindola, see her parents, yet she knew they would only send her back. When she approached the road she saw officers of the court. O, Shiva! O, Varuna! O, Indra! A young son of her neighbour, Vaidehi, came up to her.

‘Rohini, Sasarman is being taken to Pataliputra. Narada has brought charges against him because he disturbed your sacrifice and with his sinful

music poisons the surroundings, luring angry demons. The Maharajah will sentence him to death before the court of Brahmins.'

Rohini sank to the ground, her forehead in the dust: 'O, Sita, save Sasarman.'

She began to weep. 'Rohini, Rohini, farewell in this life!' Looking up, she saw Sasarman being dragged along, crudely tied to a horse. To Pataliputra ... and death ...

Suffering weighed heavy upon her life. Never again would she feel his love in the yearning songs of the ravanashtha. Suddenly, she realised how important they were for her, those melodies. Rohini did not go inside. Instead, she began to care for her animals and continued to work the garden afterwards. She did not bother about Pindola, considering herself disburdened of the duty of being hospitable to the Brahmin.

Some hours later Vaidehi herself, clearly upset, came by.

'Poor Rohini. Jivaka ...'

'O, Sita! Tell me, Vaidehi, what is wrong with Jivaka? Tell me, tell me ... why there comes no end to my calamities. Tell me ...'

'Jivaka trespassed the Maharajah's hunting grounds.'

'Go on, Go on.'

'Taken prisoner. No god can save him now; the sentence for this is death.'

Rohini was beaten. She had wrestled with her wretched fate from the day she was married. A wild jealousy often came over her, when she thought of all the married women who brought forth sons, and how she—lonely, pitiful and inferior—was being punished for unknown deeds done in past lives. She, who must bear the fear of incomplete offerings day after day, nay, even hour after hour. Scorned as a woman without sons, a widow, she had to live on, reviled by women whose adherence to the forty rites was not nearly as reverent as hers but had sons and kept their husbands. Vaidehi left her alone. She, too, was afraid and horrified at Rohini's unknown sins! If only she could die with Jivaka! No sacrifice, no thousand sacrifices had saved her from the greatest suffering, the greatest humiliation of the Arya-woman: widowed, and without sons!

She ran home. Pindola had gone. She quickly prepared to go out. She wanted to go to her father for advice. She had lost her heart. Miserable and sick with grief, she walked along the road. Vaishyas glancing covertly at the

sinner did not bother to greet her; nobody spoke a friendly word. After all, the gods were obviously punishing her, were they not? A little girl wanted to walk up to her but the mother fearfully brought her back to their house. One who is punished by the gods in this way could only have lived once a very sinful life!

‘Father ... Jivaka has been imprisoned.’

‘I know. I suppose you want help from me now? It is punishment for your own sins!’

‘What sins, my Father?’

‘Do not ask me! Even you do not know your past life, how then should I?’

Rohini sobbed. ‘What should I do, my Father?’

‘Return home, and await your retribution for other possible sins.’

Her mother begged, ‘Let her spend this night with us. Perhaps, we can soften her fate.’

‘Fate?’ snapped Rohini’s father. ‘What is fate? What you did wrong in a former life: that is fate! Do you want punishment meant for her to come down upon us? You are merely a daughter who can never bring good fortune, only misfortune. Return to Jivaka’s house and wait.’

Without uttering a single word, Rohini looked at her father. It was as if the truth did not wish to penetrate into her. Slowly, without looking back at her parental home, almost in shock, hardly knowing what she did, she turned to the road that led to Jivaka’s homestead. Twilight had settled in quickly and by then had covered the dwellings and the woods in ominous darkness. Afraid? Was she afraid of angry spirits? If only a tiger, a cobra, or a python would kill her, quickly, without hesitation! But what if Jivaka’s ghost had returned to the homestead! Jivaka’s soul, who surely cursed her for her infertility— who would torment her, thrust pain and calamity upon calamity upon her which would terrify her—would appear as an avenging ghostly shadow and drive her out of her couch and expel her from his abode. O, Varuna ... if only Shiva would send one lightning bolt and take her away from this miserable life! Or, must she bear her fate yet longer? And would it end with this life? Or, would the next one only bring new sorrows? She looked fearfully around every time she heard the rustling of leaves, when a white flowering tree appeared to her as a goblin, or a whirring beetle, dashing away like a darting ghost ... Jivaka ... Was she to

blame for his misfortune? Then he would certainly avenge himself now! Was he already near or was he waiting for her in the house? She did not dare to enter the house, yet did not have the courage to remain outside either! Every nerve in her body quivered. She could hardly move; nor could she stand still. What did she hear now! The viola! Gods! She fell down and gave up. Had she lost her mind? Sasarman? The ghost of Sasarman, who could not do without his beloved instrument, who could not bear to be far from her? The melody seemed to lament! What a heartfelt love song. Was it for her? All was lost now! Here, the avenging Jivaka, and there, the desperate Sasarman! Where could she hide from both these restless souls? If only sweet death would come now and release her! O, Holy waves of the Ganga! A thought, like a blissful cloud, came over her. That was it! The spirit of Sasarman would lead her; together they would beg the gods for forgiveness of past sins. Together they would go where a new birth awaited them. Half-mad, she hurried to Sasarman's house, and immediately noticed a faint light? Light in Sasarman's dwelling! She stumbled through the door and suddenly the viola stopped.

From inside a familiar voice exclaimed: 'Rohini!'

Rohini gripped the heavy bamboo pole of the entrance for support; she stood rooted to the ground. Sasarman flung his instrument down, dashed to her, took her in his arms and she, unresisting, let herself be carried away, not even aware if it was her childhood friend or his soul that carried her.

'Rohini ... it is you coming to me! O, Rani of my heart! You come to me, one who thought himself dead? O, lotus of my royal pond ... I am saved!'

'Saved, Sasarman, is it you?' Her hands slid over his arms, his chest, his face. 'No ghost? Does your body live? Sasarman ...'

'The Wild Prince of the Mauryas, the Vaishya, who with Kullika attended Jivaka's great sacrifice, he saved my life.'

'Was that Prince Ashoka? May Varuna bless him! Jivaka is imprisoned, put to death for trespassing the royal hunting grounds.'

'Jivaka, dead? ...' A wild yet joyous scream tore through the house.

'Then you will stay with me, Rohini. I will be in the service of Prince Ashoka. You will come with me.'

Rohini felt his arms clasp around her, his kisses burning her lips. He held her tight as if he never would let her go again. A lovely haze came

over her. Once more she felt safe, safe with the beloved, who did not despise her, who did not blame her for anything. O, Sita, could there possibly be good fortune yet for her? She sobbed, let herself yield and received Sasarman's love like a holy gift of the gods. Would all the tragedies in her life now stop?

'My Rohini, you are now my wife. Ours is a *Gandharva*⁴ marriage. No Brahmin need bless it, nor dare scorn it. Never again will I let you go. Even death will not part us.' Rohini smiled, and threw her arms around his neck.

'My loving Sasarman ... Is all bitterness gone now?'

'Yes! And I wish to give you a son. Prince Ashoka will take us with him, away from these Brahmin-poisoned regions!'

Rohini abided that night with her love regained.

The next morning they agreed that she should return to Jivaka's homestead to care for the animals.

'Those the greedy priests have left! What good is a sacrifice? When our wishes are fulfilled, then it is the soma-guzzlers who have achieved it, if not then the fault lies with the one who offers the sacrifice. When one lives very virtuously, it is a past life ... Then it is better not to make any sacrifices as I do not.'

Rohini looked at him, startled.

'I would like to know if they themselves believe in the sacrifice,' he continued.

'Why do they do it then, my dear Sasarman?'

'For the reward, the soma: the best meat, rich gifts from the toilers, the Vaishyas.'

'I am so afraid what you utter is sinful and that fresh retribution will befall, my beloved Sasarman. And I want to hold on to you.'

Sasarman's all-encompassing love enclosed her. Every barrier, right at that moment, had vanished.

'I have damned all offerings, cursed the Brahmins, spoken of their greed to whomsoever would still listen to me. All the Vaishyas in the village avoid me as they do the plague. And what is my punishment? Rohini! The gods could not have given me anything more wonderful!'

Rohini was inclined to believe Sasarman. Could it be possible?

'But what about the gods then, my beloved?'

‘I would like to thank them, if it is they who have returned my Rohini to me. But my gratitude is to Prince Ashoka. He is the one who came to my rescue.’

Rohini laughed happily, the soft glow in her eyes giving her face a rare enchantment. She hurried to Jivaka’s home, cared for the animals and his house. The slokas accompanying every action, normally chanted in great earnestness, came as always to the fore in her thoughts, but now they would not emerge from her lips. The libations she did almost automatically, but without belief in their effect now. She thought: Those who did not perform offerings were not worse off in this world. On the contrary: Kara, her neighbour, who performed the forty rites badly, had eight sons. She herself, who never neglected even one, had none! Sasarman had sinned in every manner against the laws of the priests, yet he was the one to be saved by the Wild Prince! What should she do now? She could no longer go on as before. All her earlier pious rituals now seemed strange, useless, foolish, and worse yet, false. Automatically, the incantations came to her as before as she tended the animals, cleansed the vessels. Yet, it was all different now. She performed the Agni-hotra as before— out of habit, out of fear—but no longer out of a holy belief, and no longer because of kind thoughts towards the gods. Everyone would blame her for Jivaka’s death, for sins of which she was not aware. She now felt their accusations as the greatest injustice. Could one be sinful without knowing it? She now had Sasarman: Satyavat, the true one. She loved him and he loved her, despite all earlier sins. Greater happiness could not have befallen them. They would go away, far away, to Pataliputra, away from the disdain of her neighbours! Was Prince Ashoka really a Wild Prince? He had been better and kinder to them than the gods.

She heard someone on the grounds. Who could that be ... Pindola? Sasarman? No, he would not come here. She wanted no scandal in Jivaka’s house. Rohini went to look. She gripped onto the doorpost and looked in disbelief ... Was that Jivaka? She closed her eyes and thought, what if it were Jivaka’s ghost? Desperately, she stared again in the direction from where the figure approached; it was, indeed, Jivaka.

‘Rohini! The god of house and hearth be blessed. O, Agni ... O, Shiva ... O, Varuna ... I am free! Condemned to die by the court of Brahmins, but the Maharajah showed me mercy.’ He paused, noticing Rohini’s blank stare. ‘Rohini, what is it? Are you not delighted that I am back? I have spoken to the wise Sayana ...’

‘Jivaka ... they told me that you were killed ...’

‘Condemned to death, yes, but now I am free again. The Maharajah ...’ Once again he saw a trace of Rohini’s disappointment. ‘You are disappointed. Are you not happy that I have returned and not left you a reviled widow?’

‘I thought you were dead. Then I went to my father’s house. He did not welcome me for fear that I would only bring them misfortune. Vaishyas avoided me, children were not allowed to come near me. What I feared most was your ghost; would it seek revenge upon me? The fear made me crazy and I wanted to die like you. I did not dare to enter your home. Then I heard Sasarman’s viola. But they had told me that he, too, was put to death. I hoped that his ghost would protect me from all distress. But Sasarman was released.’ Rohini paused before continuing with her tale. ‘And I have stayed this night with him.’

‘You have spent the night in the house of a friend!’

Rohini sank down on a bench, sobbed desperately, and nodded.

‘You know, no Arya is allowed to take back his wife who has spent the night in the house of a friend. Slut!’

‘I thought you were dead, Jivaka. No one would help me!’

Grabbing her forcefully, Jivaka threw her out of the door.

‘You will never come back here. I swear by all the gods you are no longer my wife. Yama take your sinful soul, wretched woman! I shall seek someone else who knows better what suits an Arya.’

Rohini stood up, deeply insulted. She wanted to defend herself, but Jivaka had picked up a stick.

She fled to Sasarman and told him what had transpired. Sasarman laughed heartily. ‘Now you are free, Rohini. No one can stop us from being together now. Wise Brahmins say that every deed is a sacrifice. We are married, wed in love: Gandharva! The priests hate it, because there is nothing in it for them to feast upon, no alms to be given. But Manu forces them to give approval. You shall never leave my house. Wherever I live, you will live. From now on, you will run my household, my Rohini.’

‘Yes, Sasarman, as well as I can.’

‘He was crazy to send you away! Kama shall bless our love.’

Early the next morning, Prince Ashoka stopped before Sasarman's house his horse steaming from the fast ride.

'Sasarman.'

'What do you require, Lord?' asked Rohini.

'Rohini ... you here?' the Prince asked, startled. Sasarman now approached, bowing low before the Prince.

'Blessed art thou, Lord. Enter my house.' He then told Ashoka what had happened.

'Sasarman, you are to be employed in the Imperial Park as overseer of the plants and ponds. At the same time, you are in my service as my agent. I want to know everything that goes on in the park. And now once more: Do you hate the sacrificial priests?'

'As the tigers and the cobras, Lord!'

Prince Ashoka explained to him why he had been employed and warned that he would have dangerous opponents: Sumana, the Brahmin-court, ministers, most of the women in the Maharajah's anthapura, who had reluctantly gone along with the Maharajah's decision.

'If you agree to the offer, then you unite your life with mine. So, know well what you do.'

'I shall never forget, O, Prince, how you saved me from the feet of the execution elephant. If I can be of service to you then nothing will be too difficult for me. Rohini and I will give our lives for you.'

'Swear to me then that I can trust you, that you will be for me, Satyavat, the true one!'

'I swear it, O, Prince. May the greatest torments of hell befall me if I do not serve you faithfully! May Shiva burn my body with one beam from his eye, Lord, if I do not serve you faithfully! Rohini is my most desired on this earth. May Yama take her from me, Lord, if I do not serve you faithfully.'

'Report to Nata, head of the park watch, tomorrow morning. Be careful in everything and never let anyone know that you are in my service.'

'Never, Lord!'

Rohini welcomed the guest with milk from purified jars, bread, butter, and fruit. Then Ashoka left for Pataliputra.

'Is it not dangerous, Satyavat, going against all those powerful men?'

'If I had been killed and reborn as a tiger, I would have eaten them all. That would have been more dangerous. I want to work for Prince Ashoka.'

‘But Prince Sumana!’

‘If he is a friend of the Brahmin priests, then he is my enemy.’

‘I fear the Brahmins. In the past, I thought them to be our rescuers from hell. But now I fear them as I do the cobras beneath the carpet of leaves on which I walk. And your varna?’

‘Varna? That is something the priests invented in order to squeeze the Vaishyas, like soma is squeezed from the fruit. Have you ever heard of the *Shakyamuni*⁵, the Buddha?’

‘Heretics?’

‘Yes, a curse word given by the priests, because he taught that every man is a human being. Who tells us that Brahmins are born from the head of Brahma and Vaishyas are born from his feet? Why, the Brahmins themselves! That the left overs from the offerings should disappear into the stomachs of the priests, that gifts should be given to Brahmins on the occasions of weddings, births, naming, and initiations of brahmacharins? They themselves, Rohini! Sacrifices, and even more sacrifices, until we are left with hardly enough to live on! If these occasions called for the serving of bitter drinks, meat from an ancient cow, caning as punishment, then I daresay they would be meant for the pariahs and the Shudras, and perhaps even the Vaishyas! Prince Ashoka, Maharajah after Bindusara, he alone is our salvation. Such guts he had! To kill the execution elephant! To nullify the sentence of the court of Brahmins! The soma-suckers ...’

Rohini was in shock of what she was hearing. She covered Sasarman’s mouth with her hand.

‘Be still, my Satyavat, do not speak anymore ill of the Brahmins. Think about Prince Ashoka’s warning. Do not insult them. That is dangerous!’

‘You are a smart woman, Rohini. By Shiva, you are right. Save me from these holy men!.’

‘So, my Satyavat.’

‘Why do you call me Satyavat?’

‘Because it means ‘the true one’ and Prince Ashoka gave you that name.’



DARK POWERS

Ashoka's appointment as commander caused great consternation and indignation among the priests who were living in the Brahmin court of Bindusara's palace. The *gantha*¹ called the wisest of them together for deliberations. Richika, the chief priest, called out as he closed his declaration:

'This is a serious matter, honoured Brahmins. What needs to be done to safeguard the highest varna in Brahma's realm, whose Emperor is protecting us, from a Prince who is indifferent to the revelations of the Vedas, and who has set at naught the verdict of the court of Brahmins? Today, a commander, tomorrow, the Crown Prince! The very gods themselves will curse Aryavarta. Surya will scorch it, plagues decimate its people! The people will renounce the gods! They will stop offering to the gods! The Noble Sumana, who honours the Brahmins and who has imbibed the holy faith as the lotus Surya's light, is being cast aside. The Wise Sumana, for whom the advice of the holy priests is law, stays in Pataliputra and the Wild Prince will carry out the Emperor's orders. Give us counsel, learned and wise Brahmins.'

Time wore on before advice upon advice—with their cold fierceness—filled the very air with menace:

‘It is better to secretly eliminate the disobedient Prince. Thus says Bharadvaja².’

‘Secret assassination is vile, says Visalaksha*. It would be good if Indra allowed the campaign to fail and the Prince to die.’

‘If the people of the accursed Taxila could deal with the Prince themselves then the blame would not be ascribed to the Brahmins.’

‘It would be good if the troops lost faith in their commander. If donkeys brayed and dogs howled at his departure, then those are evil omens.’

‘If the horse stumbles before its cart or the sword falls, no one will have faith in the success of the campaign any longer.’

‘And if many tormentors and snakes appear on their path ...’

‘If a man of horrifying appearance roams around the streets of Pataliputra begging at doors, the people will be afraid and plead with the Maharajah to appoint another, Sumana, to command the troops.’

‘He should be enticed to games, drink, and debauchery. When the Prince is smothered by a life of opulence, he will not have the strength of will to execute his tasks. Then the Maharajah will choose the wise Prince Sumana. So teaches Vatavyadhi *.’

‘Spies must tempt him to kill the Maharajah and when he is entrapped, the Maharajah should be told of his vile designs.’

‘The story-tellers, to whose words the listeners cling as lianas to the cedars in the jungle, must convince the soldiers and the Prince himself that he acted wrongly and sinfully in pushing aside the Crown Prince.’

When the last of the advice had been uttered, the head priest brought the meeting to a close: ‘I thank you all for your wise counsel. We shall appoint the most dedicated Brahmins, those who care enough for their varna and who possess enough spirit of mind, to protect the fortress of the gods from the sour fruit of a mighty tree.’

As the members of the conclave began leaving the hall, a Vaishya appeared in the doorway.

Alarmed, the priests asked: ‘Who are you?’

‘Satyavat, Lord, overseer of the Maharajah’s parks. What flowers does the honourable rishi want in the garden of the Brahmin-court?’

The Brahmins allowed Satyavat to enter.

The same day, various Brahmins went out to carefully serve the interests of the gods.

In the evening, the Maharajah told Ashoka what was discussed at the meeting of the Brahmin-court. Ashoka did not risk saying he already knew because he wanted Satyavat to work for him as independently as possible. Instead, he said, 'Throw them out! Today they are at me, tomorrow it is you if they feel you are dangerous.'

'Hail to Indra that he does not yet let young Ashoka rule Madhyadesa. If I were to root out some Brahmins for this reason the others would make even more secret plans. My informants are aware of everything that is discussed in the Brahmin-court. This I prefer for my safety ... Prevent the evil.'

'What will you do, my Father, to prevent their plans?'

'Tomorrow, before you begin your journey, all dogs and donkeys will disappear from the streets of the city. No exceptions. I hear that for the sake of your own safety you have Sela and Sagka on guard by your war-chariot. That is good.'

'My Father!'

'You control yourself well, your face revealed no emotions, but your voice did. Let no-one see, either from your face or voice what you wish to withhold or even wish to say. There will be no snakes on your path. Trusted men are even now on their way to Taxila, to set at naught the possible heinous influences of the Brahmins who departed this morning, led by Devaka. As for drink, games, and women, I will leave that to you. Today, the Brahmins fetched water from the accursed River Karamasa³ instead of the Holy Ganga, so the blessing of the purohita should become a curse. Tonight, I will have the vats emptied and refilled with water from the Ganga, and afterwards have them guarded by my soldiers. As far as your attempt on my life is concerned, I have been forewarned so many times about you, my son, that my security is especially pointed against them.'

'I thank you, my great Father, for placing so much trust in me. Why do you not punish those who conspire against your imperial decrees?'

'There are Brahmins in search of the spiritual truth, such as Sayana, Kullika, and many other noble, wise men; yet there are Brahmins serving their belly and it is not so different in our varna. Sayana hates the priests who perform sacrifices no less than you or I but the others strongly influence my people. Sayana lives in the hermitage and contemplates on the Vedas: the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, as do the noblest of Brahmins. That

is their highest and most lofty goal: they strive for their salvation. Richika and his kind work amongst the people and are always anxious about their material benefit, their offerings, their fees, their belly, their varna—let us just say, then, for the welfare of Aryavarta. The Vaishyas and even rich Shudras court their favours, to extract from the gods, gifts which are disproportionate to their efforts: protection against drought, floods and earthquakes. For them the price is never too high. Should I take away the offering priests from my people and thereby the sense of security, necessary for the work that buttresses my country? As long as the Maharajah controls the priest, he controls his people. So control them! The wisdom of sages like Sayana makes it possible for the Maharajah to scorn the Richikas but he needs to bond them, because they and not the sages influence my subjects.’

‘Or, you have to win over the people and cast out the Richikas afterwards?’

‘A great people such as mine, surrounded by many dangers— floods, earthquakes, plagues—is constantly seeking new priests who in turn must sustain their existence, and ask more. So then, we are back where we started.’

Ashoka pondered on his father’s words.

‘And if these new priests will be like Sayana?’

‘They contemplate in hermitages.’

‘But if these priests are indebted to the Maharajah for their livelihood, he can demand that they lead the people to good and truth.’

Bindusara looked at the Prince for a few moments.

‘Can you, my son, turn the world over like a page from the holy Vedas? What you are saying touches the very foundation upon which it is built.’

‘Is there anything at all, my all-knowing father, which in its essence does not strive for perfection? Each fruit, each child, each newborn animal, a city, a land, a people! That which goes backward or stagnates is contrary to that eternal principle.’

‘Why?’

‘That which goes against that principle destroys itself; that which is true to it improves upon itself.’

‘Who taught you these things?’

‘Kullika, who attributes it to Sayana. But Sayana is right. The sacrifice of animals is a striving for personal sake, thus destruction. Sayana’s offering, the symbolic offering, is one of striving for perfection.’

‘No Raja may adhere only to the latter, my wise young man, and forget the hidden power of the first.’

‘The peace and prosperity in your world empire are proof of your all-encompassing wisdom and practicality, my loving father, but ...’ He took a pause before finishing. ‘But a next ruler may look at things differently and endeavour for more.’

‘Go then, my son, guard your life first, let wisdom guide your actions, and execute your decisions with resolute will. The journey West is a long, tiring one and is not without danger. Learn to recognise and overcome that first on your way to Taxila.’

When Ashoka had gone, the Maharajah sighed deeply. Would the campaign succeed amidst all this? With such a small army, opposition from the Brahmins, temptation, the pull of power? Why was he, the holy Maharajah, so pleased with this army that was so dangerously small!

The Brahmin, Garga, reported to Prince Sumana regarding the methods employed to sabotage Ashoka’s mission.

‘You see, O, Prince, how anxious the Brahmin-court is in supporting the rightful heir of the Maharajah in his noble cause.’

‘But my father supports the greedy violator of laws who despises the gods,’ Sumana’s voice was harsh with anger.

‘One who is in pursuit of a great goal must not act in haste, O, Prince.’

‘But he may be too late! Will the Brahmins accept a wild Prince who could become a wild king? Will the Brahmin-court molder away and the host of noble priests scatter like the blossoms in springtime? Will the gods of Aryavarta tolerate such defamation?’

‘Bindusara is noble and mighty and he will rule his great empire for a long time yet.’

‘And what if a rufian should seize the imperial power! How will you, holy Brahmins, prevent that?’

‘With all our might. We want you, the rightful Crown Prince, to be the successor and our power is great, O, Prince. Remember that well!’

‘How? In what way? I want to know!’ yelled Sumana.

‘Shush, O, Prince, the cedar walls of the shimmering palace listen to all your words.’

‘Tell me how!’ Sumana’s voice contracted.

‘There are many ways: the gods gave the cobras their venom, the soldier his dagger, the cook his herbs, the insurgents their courage, the Brahmins their powers of persuasion. We will make the right choice,’ whispered Garga so softly that Sumana could barely hear him.

‘How long will this restlessness ruin my sleep and poison my pleasure, and this hate deaden my mind?’

‘Shhhhhh ... one who is to be Maharajah controls his actions,’ observed Garga keenly. ‘Trust us and our wise decisions, O, Prince.’

With ill grace Sumana sank down on his couch; in his eyes was the resentment of the misunderstood, the hate of the defeated one, and the greed for wealth and power as the ruler of India. He leapt up again, shedding all self-control, and yelled out to Garga:

‘I require the ultimate, my Garga, tell holy Richika that. Either the gods help me or humiliate me. What is it the Brahmins want?’

Nervously, Garga held up his hand to hush the loud voice. He then bowed low, clearly gratified for the Prince’s ambitions masked their own even while shifting the blame.

‘No god is a match for the Brahman of Brahmins, O, Prince. The army will encounter the power of our varna all along its way,’ Garga said, still in a whisper.

At which point Satyavat came in to bring flowers and Maskarin leaned against the cedar wall.

Like a white lotus rising out of the dark waters of the holy pond, Bindusara’s palace rose out of the trees of the imperial park. Surya rose as a fiery ball from the distant ocean, cooled by Ushas in the chilly morning mist so that his rays would not scorch India. His shimmering red haze set the entire palace aglow. The golden pillars gleamed with a deeper hue and the towers rose up like slender slivers against the dark blue of the sky. Artistically wrought flowers of emerald and beryl, birds of carbuncle and silver, flaunted their colours in the thundering whiteness of the palace, luxuriantly built of cypress, teak and cedar woods and painted a glistening white, so that the sun’s rays struck a dazzling vibration over park and city.

A large gallery, edged by great tree trunks which skilful hands had cut, carved and embedded with fantastical figures of animals of silver and gold, opened out onto the park with its big shady trees.

A vast mass of people moved up the broad palace road. The holy Maharajah himself wanted to bid his troops farewell and the *purohita* would bless them with water from the Holy Ganga. Members of the Brahmin-court would send them off to their journey with prayers and blessings. Children, young lads and nimble girls, light-footed, men and women in the bloom of their life and gray-beards, had all donned their bright red and white festive clothes. Soft muslin veils fluttered in the fresh morning breeze. Residents stood in doorways or on rooftops along with their friends.

A ripple went through the crowd. Warriors approached, heralding the rest of the army. The sonorous, heavy cadence of the big war-drums was heard in the distance, mixed with shrill flutes and the blowing of war-conches, as the soldiers marched into view. Suddenly, everyone's attention was diverted by warriors who, armed with heavy clubs, bludgeoned every dog along the palace road.

‘Remove that corpse or else the next club is for you.’

Fearfully, the owners dragged their dead dogs away. An unusual number of mule drivers appeared from everywhere. But instantly each of them was accosted by two soldiers and none too gently made to vanish from the streets. As soon as a mule displayed even the slightest inclination to infuse its ‘eee-aah’ amongst the cheerful crowd, a club landed on the animal. The street urchins followed, at first with great curiosity, then in fun, mocking the hastily retreating mule drivers until the approaching sounds of drum-beats increased, rallying all to see off the troops. First, a row of powerful armoured war-elephants, tusks ringed with dangerous barbs, each bearing three heavily armed warriors and a mahout. The earth shook under their heavy tread. They were followed by horsemen, carrying sharp metal spears in their fists, shields hanging at their sides. Behind them came the war-chariots yoked to four horses, accompanied by archers with long bows.

Ashoka drove the first chariot himself; Sagka and Sela strode beside the horses, ready to act if danger threatened their leader. The Prince kept a wary eye on the road. A shower of flowers descended before his horses from all sides: Pataliptura's fond farewell to the leader of Bindusara's army on his long journey to the distant West. Ashoka knew that present amongst all these laughing, happy people were the priests, and he espied how a penitent

had stepped out of the crowd, his weather-beaten hand clutched around a heavy cane. The Prince, fearing another attack and determined not to once more fall prey to another henchman in the pay of Sumana, pulled in his reins quickly, and directed his four-span towards the approaching penitent. The horses reared high under Ashoka's reins and then propelled forward. The crowd, alarmed, parted, and the penitent, cut off from the throng, crossed the road wildly. Ashoka, swiftly wheeling his chariot, shot off in the direction of the fleeing man who in dread vanished into the crowd on the other side, jeered on by the surrounding people. The excited, whinnying steeds calmed down after the brief chase and returned to a steady pace. With confident certainty the Prince stood in his chariot and calmly looked over the crowd. The by-standers, who had viewed the performance with astonishment, became still, seeking an explanation. A spy from Taxila? Disguised as a penitent? An angry goblin? Awe and admiration for the fearless Prince swept over them. After some hours their imagination let rider and horses soar above the road and the great driver drive with only a glance and a pointing finger ... the baleful sprite, which no-one saw again, had been destroyed with one ray from the Prince's keen eyes, the horses obeying him as a god.

The notables of the capital gathered under the gallery in front of the palace. Ministers, the thirty members of the six *panchayats*⁴ in residence, and other highly placed government officials, arranged themselves on either side of the Maharajah who was sitting on the gold-inlaid throne. The palace guards, all women, stood in several rows behind the throne, armed with heavy bows. Beside the road stood the queens and their slaves, the Princes and Princesses, and invited guests. The priests of the Brahmin-court stood on the other side, silent, reverent and in prayer. No-one quite knew, however, what they were praying for.

'The smallest of Rajas in India would not yield to such a small army,' laughed Garga, whispering in Richika's ear.

'One wasp can sometimes drive a horse into the jungle in terror,' cautioned Richika.

The purohita stood before a scaffold in front of the gallery. The elephants were arranged in two rows and Ashoka drove his chariot deftly between the giant animals right up to the front of the throne. At the same time a flock of blue doves soared into the sky from the park. Bindusara knew that this would be seen by the whole of Pataliputra as a supremely

good sign. The group of Brahmins watched the spectacle with heavy hearts while a jubilant roar arose from the rest of the onlookers.

The offering fires were already lit and their flames surged high up to the radiant heavens. The priests, who had sworn the oath of the tanunaptram for the Maharajah, now invited Agni, the god of fire, to transport their gifts to the gods and began the chant of the mantras. When the ceremony had ended, the purohita climbed up the scaffold, took a large bunch of kusha grass tied together and sprinkled Ashoka's horses and carts with holy water from the Ganga. The young commander then climbed down from his cart and prostrated at the feet of the Maharajah. The Emperor recited the appropriate Artharva-Veda incantations to his son, lifted him up from the carpet and embraced him.

'May the gods in their wisdom guide you on your journey to Taxila, my son. Guard with your manas your body and mind; be vigilant so that you may fulfil your obligation to me, the Maharajah of India.'

'My great Father, what I do, I do only for your gracious Majesty.'

The purohita went on with the consecration of the elephants, the carriages, the horsemen, and the foot soldiers. In the meantime, Ashoka said farewell to the queens, first among them, Subhadrangi, who stood radiant amongst the other women of the Emperor. Then he turned to the others and paid homage to them. Gopali and Jalini were not present; they had remained inside their palace rooms. Sumana's mother was hurt by the Maharajah's choice and Jalini stayed to console her.

Ashoka noticed Aradi amongst the women. She laughed shyly.

'You have forgiven me, beautiful Aradi,' he whispered to her, a little daringly.

'Surely, O, Prince. Along with my muslin dress I placed my sinful anger aside.'

A golden smile shone on Ashoka.

'When I return, your smile will turn to laughter.'

'Doubtless, brave commander of Bindusara's army!' Aradi's sultry glow deepened.

Suddenly Ashoka turned away. He knew what motivated the minister's beautiful young daughter. The lovely blossom of the lotus turns to the rising sun. Like a butterfly in the deep forest night, her image submerged into his soul. But in Aradi's heart once again arose resentment towards the rude and

ugly Prince. Ashoka's ambition would put Sumana in danger. How she hated him more than ever.

Untiring and dedicated, Ashoka arranged the crossing to the other side of the Ganga. He wanted to reach Taxila as quickly as possible. The foot soldiers were surprised to find that they were to ride on chariots, elephant-drawn carriages and on horseback. The troops pressed onward with a speed not previously known to the army. Ashoka led the convoy with Kullika.

'Some months, said my father ...'

'If all goes well, O, Prince.'

'My wish is to see the towers of Taxila in one month, my Kullika!'

'Your wish is unrealistic. No army can accomplish that.'

'If the army cannot then I will go alone. Taxila if it so desires can resist this army as well as me alone.'

Kullika looked at him. Ashoka glanced over his small force and smiled.

The roads had been improved and the army made good time. An advance guard under Sagka's command rode ahead and established camps at reasonably short intervals, wherever a small clearing without shrubs or a giant fig tree or a banyan welcomed them. After a refreshing rest they swiftly set forth again, marching onward until the sun approached the horizon. Ashoka was mindful that sound sleep, regular meals, pure liquids and cooling baths for men and animals kept the troops in excellent condition. Despite the fast-paced march, no exhaustion was felt.

The army passed the Sarayu and then the Gomati, following the main road leading from Kashi to Prathishthana⁵ and in a north-westerly direction over Kanpur and Mathura to Indraprastha⁶. The advance guard had set up camp in a clearing some distance from the side of the road. Nightfall in the forest had not troubled the army as yet. The flames from the fire shot high as the roasting game dripped onto the embers and the smoke rose straight up against the high fringe of the forest with its mighty duabango trees, laden with blossoms and evergreen sal trees, against the silhouette of which the fans of the palmyras or the star-plumes of the palms were etched in fine lines. As soon as the elephants espied the glow of the flames through the foliage, they raised their trunks and trumpeted cheerfully, which was immediately answered by the whinnying of the horses. Man and animal

delighted in the wonderful serenity of the evening that softly rose from the tranquil surroundings to the velvety heavens above.

‘Is there a wading place nearby, Sagka?’

‘Certainly, O, Prince.’

Quickly the packs were unloaded, tacks removed, and all raced to the tributary of the Gomati. The cool water freshened and cleansed the overheated bodies. Invigorated, they returned to the camp. In the meantime, Ashoka and Kullika partook of the food prepared by Bindusara’s slaves, who were required to taste it first. Then, after they had fed the animals, the rest of the troops came to claim their portion of rice and meat. Ashoka had decreed it this way.

‘Sagka, double the number of guards posted along all the entrance-ways to the camps. No unexpected events!’

The troops lay down in picturesque groups spread over the fields, enjoying their rest; the slaves had done their work and sat in front of their tents. Ashoka and Kullika were occupied with Viradha, a secret messenger from Satyavat, when a guard reported that a Brahmin in a black cloak was approaching the camp.

‘Send him away!’ indicated Kullika.

‘Let us hear what he has to say on this beautiful night.’

Minutes later, a Brahmin in a pure white cloak suddenly stood in front of them. It seemed as though he had appeared out of thin air. Revata, however, had seen how he had removed with one pull his black cloak, to appear seemingly out of nowhere. The impression, nevertheless, overwhelmed the men; a silence descended on the gathering which had moved up towards the priest.

‘May the gods protect those who faithfully fulfil their duty to the Maharajah, O, Brave Prince and commander.’

Ashoka’s welcome was lukewarm.

Revata picked up and wrapped the heavy black cloak around him, so that he himself was invisible against the dark forest. Then he called out loudly: ‘Hail, Prince Ashoka!’

All looked up, surprised, but saw nothing. Calmly, Revata removed the cloak. Laughter erupted. The spell was broken.

‘Whenever you wish, O, Prince, I can amuse your warriors with my repertoire of tales.’

The priest spoke so loudly that all the soldiers could hear him and they gave their consent loudly which, of course, was what he had counted on.

‘You see that you are not unwelcome,’ remarked Ashoka.

Soon, all the warriors had gathered around the Brahmin. The female slaves, who approached shyly, were also permitted to listen to the storyteller. Ashoka knew full well that the people of his land enjoyed nothing better than listening to a good narrator.

‘You are here in the land of the Kauravas and Pandavas. Then you will want to hear about the great war from the *Mahabharata*.’

‘A tired tale, Lord!’ yelled a horseman.

‘Nala and Damayanti.’

‘Living happily ever after, Lord,’ mocked another. ‘Something new!’

‘I will tell you about Santanava’s terrible oath, brave warriors.’

‘An old tale! Tell us something new, about struggle, and courage, and heroic deeds,’ a gruff soldier called out eagerly, since all the people of India revelled in tales of wondrous fantasy and excitement. ‘Do you know nothing other than the old talk? Then go to sleep! Our dreams are more important!’

The Brahmin laughed slyly and seemed to think deeply for a while.

‘Well then, I will tell you a tale from the land of the Kosalas, which flowered under the wise laws of Manu ...

Listen ... Pasenadi ruled in great righteousness ...’

He now told a lively story of the Raja Pasenadi who had two sons: Puru, pious and obedient to the Brahmins, and Trisanku, an infidel warrior, a danger to his father and the Crown Prince because he sought to usurp the throne. Frightened, Pasenadi sought counsel from the holy Ajamidha, a Brahmin and a fortune-teller, who through his yoga had become a powerful magician. Ajamidha and his beautiful daughter, Nanda, joined the struggle against Trisanku. Ajamidha appeared at Pasenadi’s court as a fortune-teller and prophesied to Trisanku, that he would throw himself three times at Puru’s feet and would then die miserably. Trisanku laughed at him, but during the narration he did bow to the feet of the magician, who kept appearing in different forms to the Prince. And then, when Trisanku stood up, the Brahmin would quickly assume the appearance of the Crown Prince, Puru. As he bowed for the final time, Trisanku had thought that Nanda had given Puru the poison, only to find out that she had given Trisanku himself

the drink, which he had intended for his brother. Grateful that Ajamidha and Nanda had protected him and the people of Kosala from a great disaster, Puru married Nanda. That was what Ajamidha had required ...

The story was narrated by the storyteller with such impertinently obvious allusions and with such persuasion that nearly everyone understood what he meant. The soldiers were indignant and did not show any sign of approval to the narrator and waited, to see what Prince Ashoka would do. Ashoka had listened to the priest, standing, never taking his sharp eyes off him. Now too he did not move, as if waiting for the storyteller to go on. The priest looked defiantly at him and kept silent. The heated whispering among the listeners broke off as the Wild Prince called out clearly:

‘Go on, Brahmin!’

‘There is no more, O, Prince.’

‘Then, you poorly understand your craft. Move back! We have a better storyteller!’ He gave a sign and the tall figure of Kullika appeared from the woods in the priest’s long cloak. Immediately, he picked up the story where it had been left off.

‘But Ajamidha was a false magician who derived his power from the devil, Mara. Trisanku bowed not to the Crown Prince but to the deceiver, whose only goal was a big reward and a rich marriage for his daughter, Nanda. Trisanku’s death was unjust because Puru was an insignificant Prince. He squandered his wealth and his father’s on the priests and, furthermore, was weak of will. He loved women, games, and strong drink. He had no will of his own, no resistance against temptation, no greatness of mind to use the gifts that the gods had given him for the prosperity and happiness of the people of Kosala. He was merely a pawn of his gurus, the Brahmins. Trisanku was a warrior; he loved his people and the soldiers. Tell me, you warriors of Holy Bindusara: Is it shameful to be a warrior?’

‘No!’ their laughing yell boomed out, and was echoed by the jungle.

‘So then, Trisanku did not make offerings of the flesh and blood of animals. His offerings to the gods were his efforts and his diligence. He struggled and in this way served Shiva, because the struggle is the greatest offering to Shiva. While Puru was sleeping off his lustful debauching, Trisanku rose early in the morning, thus making his offering to Ushas. He looked forward to Surya’s light, thereby offering to Surya. But his greatest offering was to Brahma, through his quest for the truth. He studied the

Vedas because he wanted to know which path the people of Kosala should take. It is not the Prince who serves his own interests and pleasures that will bring salvation to the land but he who works, just as the holy Maharajah Bindusara. Ajamidha was a bedazzling magician in whose trickery Pasenadi and Puru were caught. He wanted control of the palace. He even used his own daughter for his greed. That is why he wanted her to marry the weak Crown Prince. Trisanku, meanwhile, had learned much about Ajamidha's craft of healing. So, he knew the antidote to the poison Ajamidha had given him, because no one in Kosala—at the risk of being punished with death—was allowed to prepare poison without knowing the antidote. Without being noticed by anyone, he drank the antidote. And when the Brahmin and his daughter went to find what they thought would be his body, the 'living' Prince was waiting for them with a razor sharp chakra in his hand. Both fell at his feet.' ...

A great gleefulness swept over the warriors who had gathered around Kullika. The Brahmin wanted to leave but no one would let him through.

'So, I did not bow to the Crown Prince, called out Trisanku, but to a traitor and deceiver! Let Agni's fire hurl you into hell. The magician was felled with a single throw of the chakra. 'You, Nanda, will accompany me to the Raja as witness.' However, upon his entrance, Pasenadi died of fright. Trisanku had the Crown Prince imprisoned immediately, ascended the throne of Kosala and ruled his people with wisdom and strength.'

A roar of wild approval reverberated around the silent giants of the jungle which were illuminated by the flickering flames as in a fairytale. The Brahmin got up and with slow strides went back into the woods. Ashoka ordered his men to rest. He doubled the guard because he did not trust the priest.

After Prayaga⁷, their road took them through Pankala, the flower garden of the Doab, where the presence of numerous tormentors of the jungle required more caution on the part of the commander. Lured by the fire and the brisk movements of man and animals, leeches, mosquitoes, ants, beetles and scorpions, bats and lizards, swarmed over the camp in a frightening throng. Ashoka had the tents for the men as well as those for the animals covered by the sheerest of muslin-cloth so that they could rest well, for by day he pushed them to their limits. He demanded ceaseless vigilance from the guards. Every disturbance was to be reported to him.

Once, during the night, Sagka awakened him.

‘Many snakes are coming into the camp, Lord,’ he whispered, frightened. Ashoka shot up: ‘The whole watch, Sagka. Ten men in the direction of Indraprastha, ten in the direction of Kashi! Search the five jungle paths. Torches raised high. No noise. Have the snakes killed.’

The orders were carried out with precision, in silence. A little later, first four men were dragged into the camp and then the storyteller was brought in.

‘What brings you close to our camp once again, Lord?’ Ashoka asked coldly.

The Brahmin remained silent and stared insolently back at the Prince.

‘You do not answer, arrogant Brahmin! Your servants may know more about what you are doing here.’

But neither did the others offer to answer.

‘Torture by fire ...’ One was grabbed, bound and placed down with his feet close to the fire, closer and closer. The soles began to burn, and an unendurable pain loosened his tongue.

‘Curiosity, Lord.’

‘That is a lie. More punishment!’

A wild groan came from his throat. ‘I will speak, Lord!’ The priest, however, made a soft noise and the tortured man shrivelled.

‘Take the priest away!’ Ten hands grabbed the proud Brahmin and dragged him away.

‘Now, tell the truth!’

‘The priest had us release four crates of snakes in the camp, Lord.’

‘And you did not fear my wrath?’

‘The priest said we may give false testimony to protect a Brahmin. Such a testimony is the language of the gods.’

‘And do you not fear the punishment of the gods?’

‘The Brahmin said if we made an offering of cakes and milk to Sarasvati, we would more than pay for a lie for the sake of good.’

‘Where are the crates?’

‘Over there, Lord.’ The evidence was soon gathered and the other servants confirmed the story of the first witness. The priest was then brought back.

‘What was your intention regarding those snakes?’ A haughty silence.

‘Answer!’ But his mouth remained stolidly sealed.

‘I will have you killed!’

‘I am a Brahmin!’ Rage gripped the warriors.

‘Torture!’

The Brahmin withstood the severest pain without his face betraying even the slightest effect of the torture, his eyes staring insolently at Ashoka.

‘Beat him over his face and heat the branding iron.’

A heavy blow knocked the priest dizzy.

‘To what purpose were the snakes?’

‘Snakes on your path forebode ill-luck and frighten your brave soldiers,’ mocked the priest.

‘You wanted to make it appear as though the very gods had let loose the snakes on our path? Answer! The branding of a criminal Brahmin is permitted.’

‘You are no judge!’

‘I am the commander of this army and thus a judge. Answer!’

‘... Yes.’

‘You all hear it, soldiers. It was merely the ploy of a man. He thinks a few crates of snakes will frighten Emperor Bindusara’s warriors! Priest Devaka is playing god.’ Devaka was stunned.

‘Do not be alarmed, priest Devaka. I know all the Brahmins of my father’s court, so, you too. You five will gather the dead snakes and put them into the boxes!’

The four servants picked up the dead animals, but Devaka did not move.

‘I do not touch dead bodies.’

‘Tie ten snakes around his arms, legs and throat and drive him out with sticks onto the road to Pataliputra; the others to Indraprastha.’

Some time later, peace finally returned to the camp.



DANGEROUS ENCHANTMENT

The journey continued without further incident. At night they camped in the midst of the amra-woods, among the curtains of air-roots of the fig trees or in open areas of the jungle. At the campsites, Kullika narrated stories from the *Mahabharata* for they were now in the land where the *Kurus* and the *Pandavas*¹ fought their deadly war.

Whenever they passed through a city the army was warmly welcomed by its citizens. Bindusara had ordered the tributary royals with great emphasis to be of assistance to the army during their long march. They went to receive the Mauryan Prince, dressed in their most precious clothes, bearing refreshments and gifts. But Ashoka, wary of the mal-intentions of the Brahmins, made as little use of their hospitality as possible. When entering the cities he always rode the royal elephant that bore the impressive insignia of the Mauryas. And the army marched rapidly in strong well-knit formation. Shortly before reaching Mathura, he crossed the River Jamuna where he was welcomed by the Raja, himself accompanied by a large retinue seated on beautifully decorated elephants and horses. The chief queen sat under a gem-encrusted canopy. Lovely dancing girls, who had always enjoyed more freedom than other women, were part of the retinue. After an elaborate welcoming ceremony, the Raja escorted the army to Mathura, where the Raja would joyfully proclaim his devotion to the son

of the mighty ruler of Aryavarta. From all sides people came flocking in, throwing flowers on the Prince's path. They had not expected him for a few weeks yet and his arrival was met with a warm welcome. In the durbar hall of the palace, the Ranis, the sons and daughters of the king, high palace officials and the purohita, awaited the Prince and his army.

Ashoka went to carefully inspect the campsite chosen for his army. A Brahmin wished to speak to the Raja. It was Devaka, his face hooded by his cloak, who waited in the rear of the hall for the king to return.

The Raja spoke: 'Prince Ashoka is a worthy descendant of Chandragupta and Bindusara. His army is very close to his heart and comes first.'

'His only support! Our laws say that no younger son can become the king while the elder brother lives.'

'The sacred Maharajah is the one to decide this and I will guard the Prince with care. If any misfortune were to happen in my court, Bindusara would sweep away my kingdom as a storm does the blossoms in *Vasanth*.²'

'I do not ask that a hair of his head be touched, O, King. But, Ashoka's determination and ambition are well-known, and I do not believe for one moment that your will and wishes will matter if he ascends the throne.'

'They say that Prince Ashoka possesses great willpower and that he alone can govern the great empire after Bindusara. A powerful government means good fortune for Aryavarta.'

'Who governs the empire? The immutable law or the Maharajah?'

'The Maharajah who honours and upholds the law, Sir.'

'Prince Sumana, once he is Maharajah, will honour the laws. He is wise, he venerates the Brahmins as the supreme varna, as the supreme wisdom and holiness.'

'And Prince Ashoka, Sir?'

The Brahmin looked carefully around him and then said softly: 'He has overwhelming willpower; he will not consider the wishes and opinions of others. His mind is affected by the spirit of a new era that makes all equal, and sees all people as parts of one God. It is the spirit of the heathen Shakyamuni. What will be left of the sanctity of the sacrifice, the honour for our varna, or your varna, O, King, if he becomes the Maharajah? You act according to the order of the Maharajah. Everyone will praise you if you

warmly welcome the Prince with wine, music, dance, and women. He is a young noble and so enjoys festivity.'

'A Brahmin dares to give me this advice!'

'Prince Sumana, your future Maharajah, would perhaps not comply because they are sins against the Brahmanical laws.'

'The Maharajah will hold it against me if I were to keep the commander of his army from his duty.'

'His duty is to acknowledge Sumana as the Crown Prince. Select your most beautiful dancing girls. The Prince is young and fiery. Send them along as a gift of your friendship on his expedition to Taxila if he praises them. Pour sweet enticing drinks; warriors love that.'

'You play a dangerous game, Brahmin! Fear the Emperor of Aryavarta, Sir!'

'You are not the nurse or a teacher of the Vedas to that Wild Prince! Or, does the Raja of Mathura choose the side of the Shudras against the will of the powerful Brahmins?' Devaka's menacing tone cowed the king.

'No, Sir. Well, then, you tell Koli. She is as beautiful as Ushas in the morning and her troupe of dancers are as beautiful.'

'I have one more delicate question for you. Your daughter, Madri, is very beautiful, O, Raja.'

'I thank Brihaspati, who gave her to me, Sir.'

'She would be a good wife for the son of the Maharajah and may be able to lead the Wild Prince to calmer waters. To the path of the Vedas. Brihaspati has chosen her to bring the Prince to his senses. She can always be assured of our help.'

'Madri is young and beautiful but not capable of such a great task, Sir.'

'That is why the priests will stand by her side.'

'The Prince of Mayula competes for her hand and their betrothal is imminent.'

'The interests of the Brahmins, and thus of Aryavarta, are at stake here. If this Maurya Prince obeys the laws of the land, he may become the viceroy of Taxila, with Madri as his wife.'

The Raja thought about it for a moment.

'And if I refuse to give my daughter to this Prince, Sir ... to betray him to the Brahmins ...'

Devaka snapped sharply: ‘Then you and your daughter can await the wrath and the curse of the gods and the Brahmins and the next Maharajah! Think about that, Raja of Mathura! The gods control hunger and pestilence. If the Brahmins curse you, O, Raja. The Brahmins will never tolerate the violation of Manu’s laws and the Vedas. He who denies the highest good as revealed to the priests is more contemptible than the Chandala, and will fall backwards into the deepest hell. He will be born again as the most miserable Shudra dog! Think about what you do and prepare Madri for her duty. One day, Prince Sumana will have you answer for it!’

‘Why then, do you not curse Ashoka, Sir?’

‘We shall curse him when he reaches for the power that does not belong to him. I think the gods want you and the beautiful Madri to spare the happy Aryavarta from great disasters.’

Revata, who—unnoticed—had heard the whole conversation, followed the priest to Koli.

‘Koli, how beautiful you are! You could tempt a high Prince.’

‘Sir, you flatter me. For that matter it is easier to tempt a crude Asura than a lovable Rama.’

Devaka laughed in order to please the dancer.

‘The Raja would like you to enthrall the Prince with your portrayal of love. Show him in your dance all the splendour of a woman.’

‘If I were not capable of that in my dance, O, priest, then I would rather be a vaishyi.’

‘I would like to see to which expression of love the gods have chosen you for.’

‘Sir, they say he is like the embodiment of Shiva.’

‘More likely of the ugly Asura, who conquered Bhima,’ remarked the Brahmin, sharply.

‘Yes, yes! He is ugly like Shiva, as god of death, strong-willed like Shiva, as god of life, sharp like Shiva, as god of all knowledge, Sir. This is what I was told.’

‘He is as wild as Ravana³!’ snapped the priest.

Koli laughed audaciously. She knew dancers were despised yet wielded influence.

‘I shall seduce him, Sir, and ensnare him in my dance of love.’

The many guests of Mathura, dressed in all their finery, adorned with ornaments of gold and gems, walked in the park or sat on benches by the lotus ponds. Flowers and garlands filled the entrance hall with scents and bright colours. Female slaves sprayed expensive rose-water from Iran and sandal-water from Bharuchkacha⁴. As ordered by Devaka, the Brahmins circulated among the guests, relating stories of the Wild Prince and the Wise Sumana.

When Ashoka and Kullika approached, seated on the royal elephants with Revata carrying the imperial parasol, all hastened towards them, including Princess Madri. The Raja had told her of Devaka's wish, but she had protested strongly. When her father insisted that she obey him, she understood that only Ashoka himself had the power to decide. What kind of man was this Prince? Unapproachable. Proud. Fierce. Wild. Or, was that just the priests talking? As a true Kshatriya she had contempt for the self-righteous priests. And she hated Devaka, because he desired to destroy her happiness. Nonetheless, she feared his curses and his influence with the gods.

Devaka approached her: 'Does the beautiful Madri wish to see the army commander?'

'Yes, Sir. One seldom sees a Maurya in our regions. And especially this Prince ...'

'Why, may I ask?'

'Sir, the Prince has arrived here three weeks earlier than my Father expected him. My brother, Saka, says that he, along with his army, can fly through the air. In Pataliputra he flew into the air on his horse when a magician tried to kill him.'

'I lived with him for a long time in Pataliputra and never saw any such miracles performed by the Prince. He was merely a warrior; he cannot be a Lord of the three realms. One could expect such things from his brother, Sumana, the Crown Prince, and a favourite of the Brahmins and the gods.'

'No one sees everything that happens in a big city. He killed an elephant with beams from his eye.'

'Yes, I heard that, too; it was the elephant used for executions that he killed with a razor-sharp chakra!' Madri looked at him unbelievably.

'He drew Arjuna's bow, the Gandhiwa, and shot off the arrow. They say he will become the Emperor of Aryavarta because of it.'

‘No man could ever shoot Arjuna’s sacred bow, not even Prince Ashoka.’ Madri laughed.

‘The Maharajah ordered it himself! My mother says that Prince Ashoka is an embodiment of Shiva ...’

She turned away from the priest; she wanted to see Ashoka. The priest, feeling insulted, decided to leave.

In front of the hall of white pillars, Ashoka seated himself next to the Raja. Revata, with the imperial parasol, placed himself silently behind his Lord and whispered to him what he had heard and seen. Everyone then awaited the arrival of a magician who would give a performance with a monkey; he could divine the future by merely shaking his head ‘no’.

Before long, the magician entered, dressed in a large black cloak with a wide white headscarf. Under a beautiful shady banyan at some distance, he drew a large circle on the ground. No one was allowed to come into the circle, lest they fall immediately to their death. With polite interest, Ashoka and Kullika followed the actions of the magician. The high-ranking audience was far more interested in the fairytale Prince of the Mauryas, who, because of their military successes and their incredible power, were naturally surrounded by an aura of glory. They ruled from the Himalayas to the Vindhya⁵, from the Brahmaputra to well beyond the Indus.

And this Prince! Stories of miracles about him raced through the jungle, as if butterflies breathed them from flower to flower and jackals cried them through the quivering jungle nights. The holy trees, while rustling their giant crowns, whistled them forth through the hamlets, or kept silently dreaming about it in the soft-black shadowy moonlit nights: Shiva! His sharp eyes took in the persons present.

All attention then focused on the magician who had just announced that he would breathe life into a small black monkey carved of ebony, with emerald eyes. Everyone had heard tales of life being awakened in inanimate objects but no one had ever seen it. An apprentice brought the beautiful sculpture to Prince Ashoka who inspected it very carefully. With various incantations to the gods, accompanied by music from a flute and the soft beat of a drum, the magician turned first to one fire, then to another, all the time cherishing the sculpture in his hands. Ashoka looked at him suspiciously. No movement escaped him. Life! Could a man really breathe life into a piece of dead wood? The Raja asked the Prince something, but

even while answering, Ashoka's sharp eyes never lost sight of the magician. A strange plaintive melody hovered through the air. The audience felt themselves swaying to the hypnotising incantations. Only Ashoka and Kullika, disciplined as they were in their truth-seeking clarity of mind, resisted the blurring of their senses. The magician felt this and, through Ashoka, seemed to gauge the state of the others. Ashoka and Kullika found the endless repeated melody to be strongly fatiguing. Measured drawling words were rhythmically uttered to the tune of the *tourti*⁶, and the subdued beat of the *naguar*⁷.

The voice droned: 'Spirits ... around ... me ... descend ... to ... the branches ... of ... the ... banyan ...'

His gaze guided all eyes to the monkey, still lovingly placed in his hand at the sacred fires. All of a sudden his arms swung in broad, conjuring strokes. For a split second Ashoka bent forward. Kullika saw how the magician, moving like a flash of lightning, reflexively dipped into his black cloak. A moment later, he was holding a live monkey, black, with emerald eyes blinking against the firelight. He handed the mammal to his apprentice who then took it to Ashoka. The Prince looked over the little animal thoroughly; it was not at all scared as it nestled in his hand.

'From the realm of the spirits, Sire. He speaks truth if you question him,' said the boy.

Ashoka did not wait to think: 'Will the Taxilans conquer me?' he asked in a loud and steadfast voice that everyone heard. A smile played around his lips.

'No', shook the little animal's head.

'Can anyone ever—even the strongest—supplant me, the conqueror?'

'No.'

'Good!' A sweet meat was the monkey's reward.

Commotion ensued. And then, suddenly, a hearty applause. The performance was over. The magician, laden with expensive gifts, disappeared towards Ashoka's army camp. There, Sela took care that Devaka's plot would fail as well.

Young female slaves offered the guests drinks, delicious cakes cooked in ghee, and sweetened fruit.

Devaka, meanwhile, fumed with rage.

Ashoka, the king and the queens as well as the ministers, were now being seated in the Hall of Pillars. Ashoka approached Princess Madri and greeted her respectfully. Only Revata followed him with the imperial parasol.

‘You are the beautiful Princess Madri, daughter of the Raja of Mathura.’

Madri bowed deeply before the greatly admired Prince.

‘Yes, O, mighty commander of Bindusara’s army.’

‘You are fortunate, Princess: daughter of a rich king, with wonderful Mathura as your home.’

‘Happiness requires something more than wealth and a beautiful palace, O, Prince.’

‘What more does the blessed Madri want? Remember, the gods punish those not satisfied with the incarnation given to them.’

Shyness deepened the rich sultry colour of her healthy young face.

‘The gods have, perhaps, given me more than I deserved, O, Prince.’

‘Do not the Princes of Kosala, Ayodhya, of all the kingdoms around Mathura surround the most beautiful Princess of India?’

Smiling charmingly, with her palms towards her forehead for a short moment bending her delicate figure, she said shyly: ‘I feel fortunate, O, Prince, that a mighty Maurya deems me worthy of that honour.’

‘Your beauty, Madri, would tempt a Maurya to put his luck to the test.’

She hesitated for a moment, and then said: ‘May I show Prince Ashoka the beauty of the park?’

‘I would like nothing more, beautiful Madri.’

She took him along a steep road to the top of a small hill, from where one could have a clear view of the city, the Jamuna valley and the dangerous Doab jungle. Madri’s eyes, softly glowing like Chandra’s light, looked up so receptive to his as if he had tempted her, he who repulsed the girls of Pataliputra because of his unseemly countenance.

‘Lord, no one can hear us here.’

‘What does the Princess of Mathura wish to say to me that no strange ears may hear?’

‘Father is obedient to the Brahmin priests and now Devaka wants ...’

‘Devaka, did you say ...?’

‘Devaka wants me to be very friendly to the Maurya Prince, and so the Raja also desires it.’

Ashoka’s face tightened. Shyly she continued: ‘They told me you were ... very ugly.’ She paused as Ashoka smiled. ‘... that is not true. But I love a Prince from Mayula, and he loves me. Devaka orders that I have to serve the gods, and they want me to marry the Maurya Prince so that the priests will always know what plans the Wild Prince is devising to the detriment of the Wise Sumana.’

Ashoka looked at her coldly.

‘Do you think you can attain your goal this way, beautiful Princess?’

‘Do you want me to obey him? I do not want to marry you, because I do not wish to be a spy for Devaka and do not want to betray Shiva or the Mauryas. And moreover ...’

Ashoka was not sure if she was being truthful or simply serving Devaka.

‘What is your beloved Prince’s name, beautiful Madri?’

‘Prince Kala of Mayula. Kala says: a Kshatriya woman does not betray a Kshatriya or a Raja or the son of a Raja to the Brahmins.’

By now, Ashoka had regained his composure. Was she genuine or was she cunning? Was she just as repulsed by him as the girls in the court of Pataliputra? This he now wanted to know for sure; he wanted to know how Devaka thought to fight him.

‘Such a luxuriant beauty, the Doab ... O, Princess.’

‘Glorious is Shiva’s world, O, Prince.’

‘But the tiger hides in the bushes and the mosquitoes in the marshes.’

Madri understood him. ‘What proof do you want, O, Prince, that I am speaking the truth?’ she asked disappointedly.

Ashoka thought for a moment. Then, he commanded: ‘Embrace me, Princess Madri.’

Trembling, she approached the strong-willed Maurya, shyly, blushing. Then, she threw her arms around him and kissed both his eyes. Ashoka could barely resist the temptation to encompass her slender body. But then the proof he sought would be worthless. He forced himself to be calm. Despite being as affected as he was, he could sense that her kiss was friendly, free of love, yet also unforced.

‘Those I find the most beautiful, the truest and most trust-inspiring in you, O, Prince.’ She laughed charmingly, yet with all her shyness. ‘Do you believe me now?’

An unfamiliar feeling of softness suddenly came over him for this frail, little Princess, flung as she was in between the clashing interests of all those cruel men: himself, the beloved Kala, the scared Raja, the ruthless Devaka. Trust-inspiring eyes ... He would help her!

‘Is Prince Kala here?’

‘Yes, O, Prince.’

‘Then take me to him now.’ He questioned her a lot about her beloved and Madri praised Kala in such passionate terms that Ashoka no longer doubted either her or the sincerity of the Prince. When they had come down, Revata reported that the Brahmin had carefully climbed the other side of the hill. Ashoka was shocked: Had he listened to their conversation? The priest was an enemy not to be underestimated.

In Prince Kala, Ashoka found one of the full-blooded line of Kshatriyas who to the core of their being are true to their varna and hold in contempt the pompous, domineering priests. Ashoka tried to win him over for his army.

In the Hall of Pillars he asked: ‘Do you see, O, Raja, the possibility of Prince Kala in my army?’

‘The Prince is a younger son of the Raja of Mayula who will later be dependent on his oldest brother. Kala would probably be happy to accept your offer.’

‘May I count on your help?’

‘Please ... Do you see special qualities in this young Kshatriya?’

‘A faithful *mahamatra*⁸ to the Maharajah.’

‘You regard him highly, O, Prince. He wants to marry my daughter Madri.’

The Raja tried in vain to find out what Ashoka thought of her.

‘Princess Madri is not suitable to do what the priest Devaka expects.’

The Raja was alarmed; Ashoka pretended not to notice and appeared to be searching among the guests. ‘So, Prince Kala will not be the Raja of Mayula, but he may become perhaps an important man in Aryavarta, worthy of your daughter. May I convey your consent to him?’ Ashoka knew

that he put the Raja in a difficult position, but also, that he would bind two influential families in the West to him.

‘It pleases me especially if I can favour you thus, O, Prince.’

Ashoka immediately ordered a servant: ‘Ask Princess Madri and Prince Kala to come here.’

He addressed them thus: ‘Princess Madri and Prince Kala, I wish you good fortune on your engagement.’

Ashoka’s words come as a surprise. Madri then gives him a deep bow, kisses the hem of his cloak and whispers: ‘Thank you, my Prince.’ She searches his eyes but Ashoka turns to Kala. The festivities are interrupted for a while and the engagement is announced. In the rear behind the rows the priest is standing, closely wrapped in his cloak, his face shrouded. His eyes flash in anger at the happy scene before him and from within he growls out a curse that Madri cannot suspect. It was Revata, who unobtrusively had sought the proximity of the priest, who overhears.

The Raja signals for the festivities to resume. Gentle music is played: the strings of the veena resound softly and clearly, accompanied by the seemingly distant rhythm of the tabla. The ravanashtha mingles her velvet tones in the play of sounds.

Then a dancer appears, her umber-hued figure barely covered by pure white cloudy muslin as if to shroud the exceptional beautiful forms in dusk. Silently moving along with the rhythmic sounds she floats in among the circle of guests. Her posture, her arms, hands, face, feet—every part of her, down to her toes—express endless desire: the fully flowering youth who in barely restrained excitement seeks for what she does not yet know, and in short quick steps suddenly seems to ask for; then, desperately falls down, dejected and unsatisfied.

Another dancing girl appears, dressed like a rich Prince. In admiration—raised higher by the duet of the veena and the ravanashtha in a harmoniously rising melody—he is expressing an irresistible desire of love while silently striding along, the enamoured eyes intently focused on the inconsolable. Dark melodies vibrate, smarting through the crowd that was fully caught up in the performance. The Prince advances, then pulls back; the hands reach out, flex in wild longing, the fingers express devotion; the feet, hesitation; the body, fierce excitement; the eyes, pain. The beautiful dancer rises, retreats and, pushing him away, flees in hasty retreat. The

lover follows in desperation, does not reach her because her skilful hand raises obstructions that cause him to stop. He sinks down in desperation to the rumbling, rhythmic beat of the *dhole*, the god's divine drum. A shrill sound rings through the silence. The *tabla* rumbles a steady beat and a conch proclaims clearly the warrior, who sure-footedly approaches, with arms and hands waving and swaying: a wild soldier in king's cloak. His face and manner express complete surprise. He strides, deeply intent, towards the dazzlingly beautiful bride. Alarm and recoil at this ferocity. He approaches, she gives way ... an exciting play of reaching for and pulling away, of lovers' intoxication and aversion. The *tabla* awakens the fairy-tale Prince abruptly. He stands up, runs enviously towards the other two, and throws himself with wild and beautiful gestures between them. The warrior drags him away, threatens, and, once more, advances passionately towards the beauty. He will abduct her, take her away into the jungle ... Gandharva! The other suitor approaches anew, refusing to give up his beloved. It was a perfect depiction of a furious joust of love. Fiercer fighting with violent gestures. Rows of nymphs form a necklace, naked beauty hidden in gossamer Kashi muslin. They tightly enclose the bride, forming a fortress of blinding splendour. Powerful movements! Repelling and protecting the fearful Princess from the fierce battle beyond. The rhythmic *tabla* enhances the excitement. The struggle ends, and the Princess must decide. Expressions of alarm, shock, disgust and refusal from the rows of virtuous nymphs. They repel, with radiant beauty in form and movement. The bride is desperate. There is anxiousness and sympathy all around. Plaintive sounds of the *tourti* and the *ravanastha*, the flute pleads, the bride searches helplessly around, wildly gesturing that she refuses both Prince and warrior. Her gaze is undirected until she, unexpectedly, catches Ashoka in view. A smile of happiness encircles the desperation; there is longing and coaxing in all her movements. With her divine shape she forces herself upon him, with overwhelming charm, using all the means nature gifted her with as she wrested from her art ... her smile begs, prays. She offers Ashoka her naked beauty, her body, her greatest gift of nature: the regal woman. That is, if he should save her. The other dancers approach, beg, pray with her, forming tableau after tableau. Fervent temptation knocks at his young strong body.

Koli is sure: Ashoka looks up in admiration at this performance of eternal young love. A powerful yearning comes over him. He is being pulled in. No thoughts of resistance, he feels as all feel! The perfection of

the dance ensnares him, erases all pre-conceived aversion, allows him to enjoy in complete surrender and soak up the beauty of form, movement, imagery, music, and the ambience.

But as little as Bindusara—when he warned Ashoka—was aware of it, or Devaka—when he tried in all manner of ways to influence Ashoka—as little Koli realises the one-pointed state of his mind, keenly aware of every factor in relation to his endeavour. Not in any way will he give the slightest chance for Devaka's plans, as he has heard about them from Revata. He follows his path in spite of himself and has to smile at Devaka's fanatical and clumsy attempts. Every now and then Kullika looks worriedly at his pupil ... Koli's refined female sense of perfected coquetry, tells her that her persuasive powers have failed. She reaches out towards Ashoka, her fingers seem to plead, her body even more sensually curving over. Like Kullika, she too, sees his clear and open gaze. Kullika's mind is at ease: what is grain to the mower, blossom's splendour to the spring storm, the desert sand to the monsoon.

Koli falls helplessly to the ground. Infinite sadness has killed her. A mournful melody softly and sombre accompanies each movement of deep grief, acknowledging the sad ending. Even now her posture expresses a charm and temptation that deeply impresses the guests. Many weep and bow down in sympathy. With movements depicting the greatest sadness, the dancers gather the unhappy Princess and withdraw in lofty silence in which the Prince and warrior join in anguish, thereby ending the dance-pantomime. The rhythmic sadness of the dhole and the tabla slowly dies as gradually does the heartbreaking melody of the plaintive ravanashtha and the slower fading veena. A hearty applause breaks forth.

Ashoka searches for Princess Madri with his eyes; he sees her in the distance with her betrothed. She returns his look with a touching smile; such happiness could have been his! Gone. He then feels consolation: how justice is done to his guiding star. To take another's happiness away that he cannot get hold of anyway ... that would be falling short of the truth, give way to desire. Sumana ... Devaka ...

'A dance of such beauty I have never ever seen in the court of Pataliputra, O, Raja.'

'I am very honoured by your flattering words, O, mighty commander. Permit me to offer Your Majesty my best dancers.'

No smile betrayed that Ashoka knew that this offer would be forthcoming.

‘My appreciation is more than all the water of the Ganga in monsoons, O, generous Raja. Nevertheless, permit me, for such time, to leave them as a jewel in your court. They might delay me in achieving my duty to my beloved Father.’

Koli comes to the Prince and bows deeply, kissing his cloak. Ashoka gets up to say some polite words to the dancer.

‘Who were you thinking of, beautiful Koli, when performing such a wondrous and expressive dance?’

‘Of you, O, Prince,’ Koli begins anew her game with her most tantalising smile.

‘Are you filled with such desire at my beauty?’ His face belied not a trace of mockery.

‘Surely, noble Prince.’

‘Or, did you, perhaps, think of Devaka?’

The beautiful dancer recoils, confused and shocked. Who has unmasked her? At this Ashoka smiles.

‘Great artist that you are, please do me, the guest, a favour now and show how you can express hatred. That would be more in agreement with Devaka’s true feelings and would give us even more beautiful art,’ he said, unmoved.

‘That is beyond my capacity, O, mighty commander.’

‘I can scarcely believe that of a gifted artist such as you, my Koli. Moreover, the Raja has given me his best dancers and you now belong to me. Inspire me with your and Devaka’s hatred. Or else, I will give you as an offering to my warriors!’

Koli turns ashen and retreats.

A low rumble of the drums announced her return; a heavy hissing sound is heard. The audience watches with bated breath. A moment later the dancer appears, garbed in a drab black-speckled narrow long robe that hid her arms as well.

‘The Cobra!’

Slow sharp tones, synchronised in fitting rhythms, rose vibrating to the highest notes. The tabla throbs with heavy menace ... Shuffling, bent over, in a rocking motion of her upper body and then in angry shocks heaving

upwards, slowly rising with wild forward movements, then yielding, she with each move approaches Ashoka's seat ... There she sinks, reaches out to the Prince, her lightning proud eyes still directed towards him. In calm and almost slow ripples she twists her body, raising her head and torso high every now and then. Then backwards and with abrupt jolts, menacingly darting forth in the direction of the honoured guests. Her head assumes in the dusk the look of a cobra with its venomous fangs. The throb of the tabla recedes as though deep under Mathura's palace an army of snakes from the city of Nagas slithers away to obscure places. The 'cobra' lies stretched; regally, gently rocking, she moves her slim snake body. Then a strange melody sounds. An inimitable rhythm provides a fearful tension, as if all worldly laws are being broken. In deadly silence, in which each breath has halted, the horrible monster rights itself, transfixes Ashoka with its eyes and does not release him anymore. Below the pelt the neck spreads slowly to its fullest extent—the hood pure white—spreading its secret magic over the drab night. The beautiful face, consumed by wrath, takes on an expression of ruthless hate. Eyes flicker and leer at the Prince, who has with intense interest been following every movement of the snake, every mood created by the gruesome, hypnotising music. The chest of the jungle-goblin bends backwards, the head stretched to the Prince, the inescapable eyes boring into his. Then, with one abrupt gesture, the whole body lurches forward and the cobra's head, the eyes, the flickering hate surrounds him, while the music drums and rumbles and hisses with increasing agitation. Then, suddenly, everything quiets down. The menacing silence of death. A choir of cobras with swelled hoods glides in, throwing their upper bodies towards Ashoka. Once again, the deep earth rumbles: the drowsiness of the city of nagas in slumber, hissing, softer and softer, guiding the beautiful Koli, as she slithers over the shiny floor of mosaic-work, retreating in hatred with her sisters.

Revata approached the Prince unnoticed, took the parasol and whispered a short message.

'Protect her, Revata!'

Kullika's eyes were glued in stunned amazement on his pupil. Whose spirit had entered this Prince! Shiva's? Inside him a vocation was burning, stronger than any sensual passion or any display of power. The holy atman, the sara, the essence of the spirit, which unfolds itself in all life of Aryavarta ... Mankind craved a saviour. Who would lead them away from

the maya of this world, away from the heartless whipping on of the animals to the sacrificial fires by the selfish priests, away from the magic circle of a belief that divided, yet was meant to unite the unfolding of the same Atman, Brahman, the All-spirit of the wide world. People toiled in a life of fears in a land of abundance and beauty. Where is this saviour ... He?

Madri and Kala came to Ashoka.

‘Kala will accompany you to the West, noble Prince. Will you protect him?’

‘I promise you, beautiful Madri, that I will guard him as if he were mine!’

‘Your eyes,’ She waited a moment. ‘Tell me that you never break a promise, O, Prince,’ she whispered, touched. She then bowed down her frail figure once more before him and, as if gently stroking, she took his robe in her hands and kissed it softly. Her look penetrated deep into Ashoka’s heart. He looked at her earnestly and said softly: ‘Think of Devaka’s revenge, my Madri!’ She laughed.

He asked Kullika if Kama, the god of love, would not take offense that he had refused a woman like Madri.

‘The pure love of those two is a glorious offering to the god of love, O, Prince.’

‘And my offering a worthless denial ...’

‘The greatest that can happen, Sire: the offering to the offer itself!’

By the waxing moon, the Raja held a ceremony led by his purohita for the success of Ashoka’s campaign. When it was over the Prince whispered to the Raja: ‘Guard Madri tonight with the utmost care: the wrath of this priest knows no limit and is without mercy.’

The next morning the army stood ready to march towards Indraprastha. The Raja escorted the son of his powerful Emperor. Ashoka would ride through Mathura on the royal elephant. Bindusara wanted that everywhere the might of the Mauryas should be shown by the symbols that Ashoka took along: the imperial elephant and the imperial parasol, which was blessed especially for this campaign, with many *Atharva Veda* spells ... Ashoka lingered: he had expected Madri, who wanted to say good-bye to Kala! Just as he was about to order the march to be resumed, a female slave rushed in great distress towards the Raja, desperately throwing herself at the King’s feet.

‘Stand up, Cinca, what dreadful tidings do you bring?’

‘O, Mighty Raja! Princess Madri ... is frozen ... in the sleep of death.’

Ashoka’s head spun. ‘Devaka!’ he wanted to shout, but a sudden hoarseness made his voice inaudible. Everyone hurried to the palace. The Purohita who was near the body, inspected it carefully for the cause of death. He could find nothing.

‘Where is Devaka?’ asked the Raja, shaken.

‘Departed late yesterday, merciful Raja.’

‘Where to?’

‘No one knows, O, Raja,’ answered the Purohita. ‘Not even I.’

The Raja of Mathura lowered his head. ‘The punishment of the gods ...’

‘The wrath of priests, Raja!’

‘That is the same, O, Prince.’

‘For you, but not for me, nor for Prince Kala, I believe.’

A solemn funeral was held. As Madri’s body was brought to the funeral pyre by the River Jamuna, Ashoka’s army lined up as mourners. The blindly-led followers of Devaka’s would feel that this would not leave the Prince unmoved ... When Madri’s ashes had been welcomed by the Jamuna, to be conveyed to the holy Ganga, a melancholic ominous melody droned over the Doab and the valley; and the jungle reverberated the doom and foreboding throb of the god’s divine drum over the city, while conches screamed through the trees and the hermitages the Prince’s agony, so that a chill moved over all the spirits devoted to the priests.



DEVAKA'S MOANS SWEEP THROUGH THE WOODS

Ashoka left quietly in the afternoon. The heavy tread of the war-elephants made the houses shake; the carts rattled and the horses stamped their hooves. On Ashoka's orders the troops strode with bowed heads through the mourning city. Prince Kala, along with Sela, rode on the second elephant. Not a word did he utter nor did his face reveal any signs of the deep anguish and inner defiance that lay within him. Once outside the city and in the jungle, the army was quickly readied to march rapidly.

'Where do you think Devaka is hiding now, O, Prince?' asked Kala, breaking his silence.

'Devaka is not in hiding. He is on his way to Indraprastha to prepare more dangers for me and my friends, if he can, to scuttle my mission.'

'Then permit me to stop him.'

'Devaka is a cunning and fierce opponent, without sympathy nor mercy.'

'I am not afraid of him.'

'He does not fight like a Kshatriya but as a sacrificial priest without scruples, sparing no one and shunning no means.'

‘Thus, he is no match for our weapons. His cunning and brazen viciousness will be repaid by our brutal force.’

‘I do not wish to feed him another victim.’

‘And your mission for the sacred Maharajah?’

‘Your hate makes you careless.’

‘A Kshatriya does not hold his own life dear, like a sacrificial priest does not cherish that of another.’

‘I promised Madri to protect you. As for myself ...’

‘You promised her? Then you are now freed of your promise, O, Prince.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘To fight everything that crosses your path. Does he know the way to Indraprastha?’

‘Like the paths in my Father’s park. I want you for my army, my Kala.’

‘Why? You hardly know me!’

‘Better than any other. She told me much about you; she was as pure as the snow in the Himalayas. And he who to her was of more importance than esteem and greatness is to me as well.’

Kala was moved. Ashoka sought Kullika.

‘Devaka is too dangerous an opponent for the Prince.’

‘And if I give him a strong bodyguard ...’

‘Devaka’s strength lies not in his muscles or in weapons but in his ruthless wiles and priestly power. Who do you suggest should be sent along as his counsellor?’

‘Revata is more cunning than Devaka.’

‘This Kshatriya will not allow one of a lower caste to be by his side.’

‘Who is a Shudra, my Kullika?’

‘You know, O, Prince, that what the priests say: An animal in human form does not reflect my beliefs. But the son of a Raja will not accept a Shudra as his counsellor.’

‘Then let him go without a counsellor, but should he meet up with Devaka, then he will have Revata close by. I want you to stay with my army.’

‘As you wish, O, Prince.’

‘Go on ahead of us, Kala, I will send Sagka and ten horsemen along. Furthermore, listen to the advice of my able friend, Revata.’

Devaka had left Mathura in the middle of the night. The waxing moon gave him plenty of light. At the court of Indraprastha, people loved liquor like *sura*, a wine made of fermented sugar cane, corn, and honey. There were beautiful women, uninhibited and passionate. This would be the place where the proud Prince would be struck down. Was Ashoka like a Santanava, who was called ‘the terrible’, because he swore never to marry or to beget children, so that Satyawati could become the wife of his beloved Father? Or, was he an old sannyasin, who had given up all worldly pleasures in order to become one with Brahman? Foolishness! He was after power that rightly belonged to Sumana, and the Brahmin-court had chosen him, Devaka, to thwart the Prince’s evil plans. He would heap curses and kill and cast into hell anyone who opposed him! With the Brahmin-court in Pataliputra and he himself in the West, together they would tame the tiger that thirsted for the blood of the highest varna.

It was late when he arrived in the hermitage of the renowned *Vedacharya*¹, Asita. Asita’s brahmacharins revered the old Brahmin like a god, washed his feet, made his bed. They kept the sacred fire burning, collected firewood, kusha-grass and roots from the jungle, and studied the Vedas. They also took care of the guest and took his horse to the corral. Devaka joined Asita on the verandah, which glistened in the moonlight.

‘The Brahmin Devaka travels late along the Emperor’s Road.’

‘A great danger threatens the Brahmins of Aryavarta. Can you send your pupils away, my Asita?’

‘As my guest wishes, but they may know everything that I know, honoured Devaka.’

‘But not what I am about to tell you.’

Asita gestured and the pupils left.

‘The Maharajah is sending an army to the rebellious region of Taxila, but it is not commanded by the lawful Crown Prince but by his younger brother, Ashoka.’

‘What prompted the Maharajah to send Prince Ashoka?’

‘In the Brahmin-court, they believe that Bindusara fears his wild son. Ashoka is one of those untamable warriors, a danger to his royal father and

the Brahmins.'

'And the Crown Prince?'

'Very much a friend of the highest varna.'

'Thus not a warrior.'

'That may be so. But the council of the wise Brahmins is at his service while Prince Ashoka seeks his own way. If he becomes the Emperor after Bindusara—may the gods prevent it—it will be the beginning of a bad period for our varna, for the men who know the will of the gods and how to determine and lead it. We cannot allow the laws of Aryavarta to be violated. Sumana shall be the next Maharajah!'

'The Maharajah takes counsel of a purohita and I thought that my friend Sayana was one of his counsellors, too.'

'Sayana reads old manuscripts and contemplates them in his recluse on the other side of the Ganga. He does not see what is going on in Pataliputra.'

'And what does Devaka want then?'

'That Ashoka's mission fails. If he subdues Taxila, then it will be difficult to curb his rise.'

'If the rebels are victorious, then a great war will break out and bring death ... destruction ... starvation ... pestilence in the Punjab ...'

'If Prince Ashoka becomes Maharajah, the influence of the Brahmins will wane quickly! You are also a Brahmin.'

Asita took a long pause while looking at the light of the waxing moon ... 'What does Devaka want of me?'

'That you delay Ashoka's army. The later he gets to Taxila, the better.'

'When will Ashoka get here?'

'Tomorrow, I imagine.'

'Tomorrow? Impossible! The Maharajah's advance troops said that it would take at least another half of a month.'

'He has already arrived in Mathura today.'

'That is what I call commanding an army! Who is his advisor?'

'The undistinguished Brahmin, Kullika, a pupil of Sayana's.'

'How would you have me delay the army?'

'Must I teach that to someone who lives in the jungle? You have herbs, pupils, Vaishyas, perhaps even impure hunters or shepherds at your

disposal. You can cause illness among the horses and elephants, or people if the gods find that necessary! Asita, the gods do not want the Wild Prince because he neglects them.'

'Then know this, Devaka, I shall not help you. You are on the wrong path. Woe betide the people whose priests declare that their own selfish will is that of the gods. You remain desirous. And what is the fate of those who desire? A return to a new earthly existence! Do you know, Devaka, what a new earthly existence will bring to you? He, who is devoid of desire—nay, has silenced desire—his life-spirit is not extinguished; he is Atman merged into the Brahman. If all the passions that nestle within the human heart disappear, then he who is mortal, becomes immortal: he then abides in Brahman. Devaka ... If the Maharajah sends Ashoka, it is partly on Sayana's advice. Sayana was already a wise man when he studied with me in Taxila, when Devaka was but a child. I do not interfere with decisions of a Maharajah who governs the vast Indian land in wisdom and respects the good Brahmins. According to the *Arthashastra* he is the only one to decide who will succeed him, who will be Crown Prince. Do you think that I will break the sacred laws of the Maharajah? How do you know, that the gods want what you want! How do you know, that Sayana's advice was wrong and that Bindusara made the worst choice by choosing Ashoka as army commander?'

'He harms the varna of the Brahmins!' rasped Devaka.

'Are you or Bindusara or Sayana or Kullika to determine that?'

'We! Because we know that Sumana will obey the Brahmins and thus govern wisely.'

'Which Brahmins?' asked Asita with skepticism. 'The ones like Richika or the ones like Sayana?'

'Brahmins who know how one rules a land without harming the varna.'

'Kshatriyas will govern the land, Brahmins show the Aryans the divine path, Vaishyas work the soil, and Shudras serve. Thus is arranged by the Brahmins.'

'But the Brahmins make sure the arrangement is sustained.'

'That is the task of the purohita. Since Prince Ashoka's advisor is a pupil of Sayana's, you should have no objection to that, Brahmin.'

Devaka remained silent. His anger prevented him from ordering his thoughts. Asita waited, not interrupting.

‘Show me to my bed, Asita.’

‘As you wish.’

Just then, a dark shape left its hiding place in the immediate vicinity.

Early the following morning, Asita’s bramacharins told him that Devaka’s horse lay dead in the corral. Asita was shocked.

‘Go to Lamba, the Vaishya, and ask if he can take Devaka in a bullock cart to Indraprastha.’ Asita then said to Devaka: ‘To my great regret, your horse was found dead in the corral.’

‘Dead?’ Devaka looked at the Brahmin suspiciously. ‘Brahmin hospitality also involves taking care of the possessions of the guest, Asita.’

‘What do you mean, Devaka?’ asked the hermit calmly.

‘Perhaps, you think it of greater importance for your karma to support the commander of the Maharajah’s army, the Shudra Ashoka in his endeavours than the Brahmin Devaka.’

Asita stared directly into his eyes for a long time; then he turned his back to him.

‘Perform your pujas, eat your meal, and leave the hermitage. A bullock-cart is waiting on the road to take you to Indraprastha.’ Asita went back to the verandah and immersed himself in his sacred scriptures.

Some time later Devaka took leave. The Vedacharya did not look up nor acknowledged his expressions of gratitude nor did he wish him a good journey. A brahmacharin took Devaka to the bullock-cart.

Late in the late afternoon, Prince Kala, along with his guard, rode up to the hermitage. Delighted Asita walked up to meet his new guest.

‘My Prince Kala! That you were still able to find my hermitage. What a joy it is to see you!’

‘Thank you, my Guru, my joy to see the holy Asita is surely no less great.’

‘Have you come on a mission that you take soldiers along? Or, may I offer you my hospitality? You look tired.’

‘I belong to Prince Ashoka’s army. The Brahmin Devaka tries to thwart his mission.’ Kala then told him what had transpired in Mathura. Asita embraced his former pupil in compassion.

‘Is vengeance not the task of the Raja of Mathura?’

‘The King believes that the gods have punished him and Madri. Prince Ashoka has left it to me to capture and try the Brahmin.’

‘Do not kill a Brahmin, my Kala. The Brahmins will never forgive you. Your life may be a long one. And hatred is not cured by hatred.’

‘Devaka is neither worthy of hatred nor forgiveness, as little as a hungry tiger is. He must be rendered harmless, though I had to promise Prince Ashoka, not to kill the criminal.’

‘Then it is good. The young army commander seems wiser to me than Devaka thinks.’ Then, Asita told the Prince what had happened in the hermitage.

‘I shall follow him immediately, revered Asita.’

‘First, come in with your soldiers, my Kala, refresh yourself a little in my refuge. Devaka is on his way to Indraprastha and will not escape you. He is not yet a half-a-day’s journey ahead and is travelling in a bullock-cart.’

After having bathed and eaten, Kala continued his pursuit ...

Devaka had been delayed. While the oxen proceeded quite rapidly, the priest kept thinking about what needed to be done in Indraprastha and Taxila. Then, above the sounds of the animals and the rumble of the old cart, he heard someone calling out to the Vaishya Lamba. Lamba took no notice of the young man who was waving his arms by the side of the road. Devaka sat up and bid Lamba to stop the cart.

The man on foot came hastily closer. But when he saw the Brahmin, he appeared to turn timid. Devaka observed him keenly: a strong virile young man with a sensual face; a blush deepened the colour of his light brown cheeks.

‘What is it you want?’

‘I wanted to ask if I could ride along, Lord, but I did not know a priest was sitting in the cart.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To Taxila, Lord.’

‘To study?’

‘Yes, Lord.’ Devaka noticed his hesitation and shyness.

‘You are a brahmacharin?’

‘Yes, Lord, I was.’ Devaka jumped off the cart and walked some way back with him.

‘With whom? Who are you? And why did you leave before completing your studies?’

The young man looked anxiously at the stern Brahmin.

‘Lord, my name is Shakuni. For four years I was a brahmacharin with the old Brahmin Dhaumya.’ Devaka stared into the eyes of the young man for a time.

‘You have sinned, Shakuni, I know it.’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Tell me. Beware of lying to a Brahmin! He who lies will be heavily chained by Varuna and kept helpless for a hundred lifetimes.’

‘Yes, Lord. About a year ago, the holy Dhaumya was infatuated by the beauty of a young Vaishya woman and forced her father to give her to him in marriage. Kama kindled an improper love in my heart, Lord, for that woman, the beautiful Sari. And soon I noticed that she was not averse to my feelings, sinful and unbridled though they were. I fought against it! It robbed me of my sleep, yet did not prevent me from performing my tasks. I worked feverishly trying to crush my restlessness. I obeyed the rules that a brahmacharin was expected to follow, had my hair shorn, never forgot my staff and sacred thread. My dress was of bark. I never succumbed to pleasure or enjoyment, Lord, I never ate before my master had eaten. I was the first to awaken; with joy I gathered firewood from the forests for the sacred fires. Every evening I washed my master’s feet and prepared his bed for him, before I laid myself down to sleep. But Kama brought about my fall. I could restrain my love for Sari no longer. Even while learning the sacred Vedas, I could not erase her from my mind ... if she was not there herself. Kama’s power drove me more and more towards her, and I felt she, too, loved me. In my dreams she was my beloved. I should have left my master’s house then and told him why I was leaving. I convinced myself that my feelings for Sari would disappear, if I would but dutifully perform my rituals as a brahmacharin. In reality I did not want to keep a distance from her. The Vedic chants refused to enter my head. I punished myself sometimes till I drew blood, when my sinful love pestered me too much. Kama blinded me. I could no longer learn. Finally, we revealed our love to

each other. The holy Dhaumya appeared not to notice and so we became more careless, until my master found me one night in her arms, Lord ...’

‘Violating a guru’s bed!’ Devaka cried out angrily.

‘Yes, Lord.’ Shakuni bowed deeply before the priest.

‘That is a deadly sin!’²

‘I know it, Lord. Dhaumya drove me away. He did not want to place a charge against me because I had always fulfilled my duties. Now, I do not dare to go back to my father. I had heard that an uprising has broken out in Taxila. I am going there, Lord. No one knows me out there.’

‘The gods will never forgive your shameful deed.’

‘No, Lord. That is why I seek the accursed land on the other side of the Sarasvati.’

‘... Unless a holy Brahmin intervenes.’

‘Lord! What kind of penance would I have to do to atone for this sin?’

‘Unconditional obedience to the Brahmins! Fight every infringement of Brahmanical laws, to death if necessary. Protect every Brahmin against heretics and sinners. I may then be able to undo your sin.’

Shakuni leapt up from his repentant pose.

‘Lord, I will do everything you order me to do.’

‘I am also going to Taxila, but my life is in danger. I do not tolerate the violation of our law books and so anyone who sins against it is my enemy. That is why I am in constant danger. Protect me.’

After giving him some further information Devaka took him on with the customary ceremonial as his pupil.

‘Now, you owe me your unconditional obedience. It is on my word alone that the gods can liberate you from your terrible sin, Shakuni.’

‘Yes, Lord.’ Both of them then climbed onto the bullock-cart, and continued along the road to Indraprastha. Shakuni took up as little room as possible so that he would not bother the priest.

Prince Kala followed the tracks of the bullock-cart as long as daylight permitted him. He then looked for a hermitage to spend the night, and not until the following afternoon did he come face-to-face, first with Revata, then with his enemy. He approached swiftly and forced Lamba to halt.

‘Get out of the cart, Devaka.’

The Brahmin did not move but recognised Prince Kala and understood what drove him.

‘Seize him!’ Before long, Devaka was standing among the soldiers.

‘Who is your companion?’ Devaka did not answer.

‘Who are you, brahmacharin?’

‘The Brahmin Devaka has allowed me to ride along in his cart.’

‘Do you know Devaka?’

‘Not till I had met him yesterday.’

Lamba was now sent back, Shakuni had to continue his journey on foot, and Kala led the Brahmin along an elephant path into the jungle, far from the Emperor’s Road. Surrounded by the savage jungle, Kala halted in a small clearing where wild elephants had been taking their meal. There the Prince had Devaka bound to a tree, tying each limb separately as well as his head with leather thongs.

‘I know all that you did in Mathura, Devaka: you overheard Prince Ashoka’s conversations, you used Koli, you manipulated the Raja, Devaka; now I only want to know why Princess Madri had to die ... and who killed her.’

‘I am a Brahmin and do not let a Kshatriya question me.’

‘The Maharajah’s army commander has ordered me to capture and try you.’

‘Would not the commander rather do that himself?’

‘You know who I am, and now, answer! A commander will not show pity or respect even to a Brahmin, if he is a threat to the army.’

‘Because Madri disobeyed the gods.’

‘Who killed her on the order of the gods?’

Devaka remained stubbornly silent. Kala repeated his question more forcefully, but received no answer.

‘Break his left leg!’

Not the slightest sound escaped Devaka. The horsemen stood unmoved.

‘Who?’ No answer. ‘Now his right arm.’

‘Know that the most terrible punishment awaits you in the deepest hell, Kshatriya dogs! My curse shall strike you in this life and in the next hundred lives!’

Devaka's moans swept trembling through the woods, but the hearts of the warriors seemed to be as unmoved for this priest as the trees around him.

'My men will not be stopped by the ranting of a murderer. Go on!'

Devaka did not utter a sound, but fainted. Kala waited quietly until the priest recovered his consciousness. Then, he said in an icy voice: 'Now, his right leg. Or do you wish to speak?'

'I myself, wretch!' Devaka hissed. His face was distorted by rage and pain. 'The gods ... wanted a guilty one ... offered ... and you are next ... You are cursed ... You all will die before Taxila and be reborn as impure Chandalas and Shudra dogs, for a thousand births ... you Brahmin killers!'

A few warriors turned pale and drew back.

'Seal his mouth, which is as false as the jaws of a cobra. First, save your own soul before you start with ours, woman-killer!'

Kala inspected the bonds and ordered everyone to return back on to the Emperor's Road. They did not bother to look at Devaka again.

A little later, Shakuni emerged from the woods, carefully loosened all the ropes, supported the moaning Brahmin and laid him gingerly on the moss. With utmost care he bound the broken limbs with splint, lifted Devaka onto his back, and carried him to the Emperor's Road, resting at every turn along the way. With much effort he reached a recluse, where the priest received the nursing he needed. Devaka understood that Ashoka would leave him far behind and did not know who now should replace him. The residents of the recluse turned out to be faithful subjects of Bindusara, or feared him. Shakuni devoted himself wholly to his new master, who bore his forced idleness poorly.

In the evening, Shakuni informed him that Ashoka's army had gone ahead. Devaka spat out a terrible curse. Finally, he decided to send Shakuni ahead with a mission to Taxila although no king or Brahmin would probably take any note of the instructions of a brahmacharin, concerning secret measures against the feared commander of Bindusara's army. Ashoka would escape the dangers of the court in Indraprastha.

That evening, Ashoka learned from Revata that Devaka had been freed by his young disciple.

THE INTERRUPTED SATI

Ashoka's arrival in Indraprastha came as a complete surprise. The army proceeded to the *nagaradhyaksha*¹, Bindusara's chief magistrate. The Prince knew that the tributary Raja was a Kshatriya who rarely involved himself with the task of governing his land; the only thing he knew how to do was to collect taxes so that he could live a life of luxury. Drinks and women had weakened the Raja; he preferred to leave the governing to Bindusara's officers. When Shakuni called on him and informed him of Devaka's wishes, he replied:

‘Prince Ashoka receives my fullest hospitality.’

‘Devaka wants you to give him a festive welcome to the city, O, Raja.’

‘One who is already in the city cannot be welcomed anymore, tell your Lord that.’

‘The Maharajah does not look with favour on those who do not give his son the appropriate honour.’

‘The Maharajah did not inform me of his commander's arrival.’

‘The gods want you to offer Prince Ashoka the pleasures of your court.’

‘My purohita did not discuss this. So, I do not know the will of the gods, my young man.’

Shakuni understood that he could not accomplish much here and travelled quickly on to Taxila.

Ashoka collected all the information he needed, set up a speedy messenger-duty with Pataliputra, keenly interrogated a few *sthanikas*² and the head of the foreigner's department, and came to the conclusion that most likely the Taxilans had no notion yet that he was arriving. He politely refused any welcome; he became more cautious as he neared the end of his march. That very day he continued by taking the shortest road to Taxila. Although it traversed the northern-most portion of the Indian desert, there were few rivers to delay his progress. Once he had crossed the Shataadru, he would arrive in the fertile Punjab ...

Kullika interrupted his thoughts as he asked: 'Do you not wish to hold an offering ceremony, before entering the West which lies on the left bank of the Sarasvati? Let us not neglect the gods.'

'My work is my offering, my Kullika. According to Sayana, that is the most complete offering. I offer to the god of the day by my use of the day, the god of war through my conscientious preparation for war, Shiva by sustaining all that lives and destroying that which deserves death.'

'And your offerings until now have been received with favour, my Prince. Your quick decisions are a continuous offering to the gods.'

'But when I reflect in silence, my Kullika, I sometimes have doubts about what is worthy of life and what is not.'

'Shiva, the god of life and death, shall direct your mind, O, Prince, and bless your deeds.'

'Perhaps ...'

The army pressed on even more rapidly. The forests began to thin as they neared the Sarasvati, but when the border between India and 'the accursed West' was crossed, the scantiness of vegetation became even more alarming. The elephants, in particular, survived the sandy stretches poorly. Ashoka's concern for the animals increased as difficulties grew. Every waterway or pool was used for spraying and bathing the animals, despite the loss of time. As they proceeded, Ashoka would ride back and forth spotting every weak point and having it set right. Man and animal equally shared in his never-failing care, especially now that the endless sea of sand lay stretched out before them. But his thoughts as ever kept tossing about in his mind.

‘What is India without people, my Kullika? It is the people who give it its value. What is a Maharajah without the lively progress of the Aryans ... and the Mlecchas³ in his jungles, rivers, and fields? Beauty exists only where beauty is felt, greatness where one beholds greatness, joy when joy surges in the hearts of living beings, and trust when trust fills the soul. Where there is no one to behold, there is no beauty.’

‘You pierce deeper into the nature of reality than many a scholar who has spent years of study in lonely hermitages, my Prince.’

‘You flatter me, Kullika. I often think that after all it is the people alone who give value to a kingdom. What is the meaning of all those treasures that are piled up in the treasuries of my Father’s palace! The more one values gold, jewels and other treasures, the more one limits one’s self spiritually and the less one is open to truth, Kullika. The less one values the human being the more one limits one self spiritually and the more we value him the more freely will our thoughts unfold. It is, I believe, not a light task, my Kullika, what the gods expect of a Maharajah.’

‘He who views it as light would be better off in the body of a crocodile, meditating in the quiet ponds under India’s hot sun, O, Prince.’

‘Why then do the Brahmins of Pataliputra want someone like Prince Sumana on the ivory throne?’

‘Once the Brahmins have destroyed the Kshatriyas, by not shunning the help of the Shudras and the Mlecchas and these very forces now threaten to grow beyond control. With Sumana, they think they will regain their earlier influence and exorcise the sinful present. The Mauryas honour the Brahmins, but tolerate no infringement of their vested power and rights: they govern, and allow no other power beside themselves. Ashoka is feared even more than Bindusara. The Brahmins wish to go back to the days, their position, when they were in control.’

‘Returning to the past because of the sinful present is giving a chance to a new reality.’

‘But the sacrificial priests, who want Sumana, think that Mahdyadesa is the world. Their gods rule over that world. And they, through their prayers, rites, and sacrifices, rule over the gods and thus they are the rulers of the world.’

Ashoka’s face hardened and his dark hue became bleak. He remained silent for a long time. They travelled on along their difficult road ... Two

days later, they reached the Shataadru, the first of the five big rivers they shall traverse throughout their journey. On the other side was the fertile region of the Indus, where vast wheat fields pushed their way in between the dark tree trunks of the jungle, where the fields offered more food than was needed. The farmers laboured in and around the villages. Here, the land opened up to the West for trade and commerce between people. Here, the Hellenic culture had penetrated, with Greeks, Egyptians, Persians, and Syrians. It was Chandragupta who had brought in the western influence: the architecture, the foreign officers, the trade that brought exotic merchandise and accursed forms of art amongst the Aryans, and dissatisfaction and disbelief.

Strange envoys from foreign countries lived at the court of the Mauryas and brought with them strange, uncommon points of view. That is why the priests cursed all that came from the West: the Indian desert and the Sarasvati were the boundaries, established by the gods, and the Brahmins fortified them with their deepest hate. On the other side of the Sarasvati lived the godless dasyus, people without Brahmins, without the Vedas. Bindusara still respected the Brahmins, but who would succeed him?

Their arrival in Panchanada⁴ made man and animal happy. The elephants, horses and bullocks could be better cared for and the woods offered the warriors more protection. They scorned the accursed West where evil spirits and dark dasyus lived and where sacred nagas and nagarajas were worshipped. That the region yonder was in rebellion did not worry them: Prince Ashoka was their commander and that alone gave them confidence. They would now proceed from river to river, and had been given orders to be on the alert more than ever, keep their weapons handy, to look as warlike as possible and carry out every order strictly. Ashoka dressed himself now with care as the great Mauryan Prince, adorned himself with costly ornaments, and a turban with many jewels. He armed himself more heavily than at other times, and his chakras were sharpened once again. He then wore a dark cloak that concealed everything. While the army crossed the river to enter Parushni, the young commander wanted to find out for himself what the people of Panchanada thought about the uprising. Revata would accompany him. They raced through two settlements. In the first, the farmers did not reply to Ashoka's questions about the route to Taxila, while

in the second, he was informed in a dialect that was understandable, that he should return to the Emperor's highway.

'Is it safe in Taxila?'

The farmer merely shrugged his shoulders.

'They say that a rebellion has broken out.' On being further questioned, he said:

'One must have something to do in the cities ...'

'And the farmers?'

'They work on the lands of the Maharajah and do not involve themselves with the problems of the city dwellers.'

'And if the governors demand too much tax?'

'The Maharajah determines that himself.'

'Warriors never come here?'

'Yes, but they do not interfere with the farmers. The Maharajah forbids this most strongly.'

'But I see no farmers on their land.'

'They are cremating the body of the old Kasaka, and his young wife is being burned along with him.'

'Where?'

'There, by the river.'

The farmer showed him the way and Ashoka immediately galloped off in the indicated direction. A funeral pyre had been set up on the banks of the river, whose dark yellow waves pulsed onto the Indus. Close by the river was the body of Kasaka, covered with a white cloth. Priests had begun the funeral rites, mantras were being chanted and hymns sung while preparing the ritualistic offerings to be given to the gods. Closer to the side of the jungle from where Ashoka was approaching stood a young woman, surrounded by the dark figures of farmers and the chief priest, who with strong pressure was trying to persuade her to do something.

'I do not want to!' was the answer, repeated again and again by the beautiful young woman, whose clothing showed that her husband had been very prosperous. A short jacket fit snugly over her well-endowed bust and upper arms, but left uncovered her slightly rounded shoulders and graceful forearms. Her slim midriff was bare and of a deep bronze colour. The beautifully embroidered skirt, long in the back and short in the front, ended just above her knees and left her strong feet and beautifully shaped legs

unfettered and visible through the tight skirt, right up to her broad hips. The neck, noble of line but somewhat stocky, supported a head that was of strikingly good proportions. Her large, softly-glowing eyes, under the shadows of long black lashes and finely shaped eyebrows, her charming childlike chin, and thin, slightly curved nose, the soft red lips. All must have roused the lust of the much older Kasaka. Her posture, too, was fine and appealing. The long, drooping headscarf had fallen on the ground. Sheer fear shook her body; one moment she shrank back then in the next held out her arms as if to repel the priest. Ashoka understood immediately what was required of her. He could follow quite well the Gaathi dialect in which the girl and the priests argued.

‘Kasaka wants you to accompany him on his journey to the world of the Fathers, Gopa.’

‘But I do not want to be set ablaze alive! I do not want to and I do not dare to!’

‘You know, Gopa, that the death of your husband is a retribution for sins, committed in your former life, for which you must do penance now.’

‘My Father sold me, knowing that Kasaka was old and would die much earlier than me. They and you, priest, forced me. And do I now have to climb the funeral pyre of my husband? I do not want to! I do not want to!’

‘Kasaka gives orders, not you!’

‘The living Kasaka, not the dead!’

‘You will be cursed by our community, reviled and ostracised, if you continue to live among us. Men will look down upon you; the women will curse you and condemn and humiliate you ... a widow!’

‘Anything is better than being burnt alive!’

‘If you accompany your husband on Agni’s wings to the heavenly world, you will be honoured as long as your memory lives. You will not be a widow, but Kasaka’s heavenly bride.’

‘It is not my fault that I am a widow. Father sold me and I have with all the power in me cared for Kasaka, pampered him. I kept him from every evil. I supported his old body so that no mishap should befall him because I had heard, Lord, that you would be paid twice for the funeral service if I were to be burnt with him.’

‘A woman who does not obey her husband is no better than a whore.’

‘I obeyed my husband to his last breath.’

‘Gopa, he will follow you like an evil demon, with every step you take, he will torment and frighten you, make your life unbearable, and not one of us will lend a hand to protect you.’

‘I do not ask for your protection. Let me go!’

‘Gopa, take your place beside your husband; the funeral fire waits to take you to better places than this one.’

The priest attempted to gently push her towards the pyre, but Gopa resisted desperately.

‘Give her something to drink! Here Gopa, drink this to become calmer and quietly think about what you should do. Drink, Gopa.’

Gopa drank. It was an intoxicating drink, and she spat out the next mouthful, refusing to drink any more.

‘You poison me, priest, you murder me! Help! Murderers!’

‘Come along, senseless woman, you resist more vehemently than an animal before its sacrifice.’

Yelling and screaming, Gopa tried to free herself from the hands that had grabbed her from all sides.

‘Sing out your prayers loudly! Beat the drums, blow your conches!’ commanded the priest furiously. A deafening roar rose from the troops who were watching the funeral. Powerless, her resistance weakening, she was dragged along, every scream of fear drowned out by the roar of the crowd and the noise of the drums. The priest went ahead while others followed with the helpless woman, terror-stricken and stunned, still weakly resisting, in the strong arms of the farmers. The jungle echoed the roar and clamour. When they lifted Gopa up and laid her down, wanting to tie her up next to the body of Kasaka, a last enraged shriek broke out of her lips. With the strength that only desperation can give one could hear clearly even above the yelling of the crowd and the thunder of the drums:

‘Shiva ... God ... save me from these murderers!’

Ashoka had observed the dreadful ceremony with growing anger. Quick as lightning, his thoughts leapt: intervene? And expose himself to the instigating priests? Man-and gods-dishonouring ceremony ... his duty as the army commander ... greedy priests ... injustice to that brave woman. His name in Panchanada ... Never! That he did not wish! He threw off his cloak and in his glittering royal dress he charged, his horse scattering the startled participants of the funeral ceremony, who ran to either side.

‘What do you want, Gopa?’

Gopa sat up, pushing her hair away from her eyes.

‘Lord ... Shiva ... I do not wish to be burned alive along with my dead husband.’ Great sobs broke out of her.

‘Who, in the kingdom of the mighty, holy Maharajah Bindusara, dares kill this woman against her will!’ Ashoka roared. Grabbing his gleaming chakra, he was ready to strike at anyone who dared to lay a hand on the girl.

No one said a word. The farmers threw themselves to the ground, folded their hands together and bowed their head, as if Shiva himself had descended from Mount Kailasha.

‘Stand up, Gopa.’ Quickly she slid down from the pyre and approached the Prince timidly.

He reached out to her, ‘Jump!’ And she swung herself onto the saddle in front of Ashoka, with a liteness and agility characteristic of her people. The Prince could still see the priest fervently muttering. Digging his spurs, Ashoka galloped off into the jungle and caught up with his army which was getting ready for the march. Revata had picked up his cloak and followed.

Ashoka handed Gopa over to the care of two female slaves, who took her to one of the carts and tried to calm her overwrought nerves.

The priests were inclined to see Ashoka more as a lustful Kshatriya than Shiva and muttered their terrible curses about the robber. They immediately sent a brahmacharin to a tribe of Khasas living in the jungle, known for their martial skills and plundering, to alert them that there was something to be earned. The priest promised a large reward if they punished the Kshatriya and brought Gopa back. The dark Khasas, agile and powerfully built, rode as though they and their horses were one. They eagerly followed the directions that had been given and soon understood that the trail led to the Emperor’s highway. From the farmers whom they met along the road, they heard that a Kshatriya had indeed ridden by with a woman, followed by a servant, heading in the indicated direction.

With their fast horses the Khasas were able to catch up with Ashoka’s, but realised that an open battle would be out of the question. At best they could seize the woman by a ruse. Riding at a terrific pace, they made a feint at the rear-guard and then swerved away. They repeated this manoeuvre several times, to arouse great curiosity. Soon, they knew in which cart Gopa was hidden. The army, however, continued to march, undisturbed and calm.

Ashoka seemed to have barely noticed that a troop of horsemen had followed them. As they entered a narrow road, hemmed by an impenetrable jungle, the army was suddenly ordered to halt. Ashoka's horsemen turned around and rode towards the Khasas with lances at the ready. Wanting to bolt, they instead found the way behind them barred by some ten elephants and a strong troop of cavalymen that Ashoka had brought in through a side road. The Khasas looked at each other, dumbstruck. Ashoka mounted the royal elephant with Revata, who was carrying the parasol and approached the outwitted horsemen.

‘What do the brave warriors want? Who is your chief? ... You? What do you want of the commander of Bindusara's army?’

‘Nothing, My Liege. I am Sangala, the chief of these Khasas.’

‘Why do you hold up the imperial army?’

‘Lord, Gopa, Kasaka's wife, has been stolen when she wanted to offer herself at the funeral pyre. We wanted to take her back and punish the bandit.’

Ashoka had the cart in which Gopa was sitting brought up.

‘Look here! Are you looking for this woman, who was almost poisoned by the priests?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Is she a slave?’

‘No, Lord. She is a free Arya.’

‘Does her husband want her back?’

‘No, her husband has died.’

‘Does Kasaka have a brother who wishes to take her as his wife?’

‘No, My Liege.’

‘Who then can force her to return?’

‘No one, Lord.’

‘Gopa, do you wish to return to the pyre on the Pishna to be burned with your dead husband?’

‘No! No, Lord!’

‘So you will not get her, Sangala, because she refuses. Furthermore, you want to punish me. I took Gopa. I am Prince Ashoka, presently army commander and thus sole judge in Panchanada, appointed by the Maharajah. I judge you, who thought to capture a free Kshatriya woman, to allow her to be killed. Lay down your weapons, all of you. So ... here, this

one from among your warriors has the thickest head of hair. Transfix him by his hair with your arrow, Sagka.'

Sagka made the Khasa stand against a large tree trunk, retreated twenty paces, drew his bow and shot the arrow through the hair, fixing it to the tree.

'So Sagka ... that was a beautiful shot.'

Then the Prince grabbed a chakra and sent it whizzing through the air and cut the whole of the head of hair of the Khasa, so that he was freed.

'Do you want to fight us?'

'No, O, Prince.'

'Go then and return to the priests who sent you and tell them that Gopa does not wish to be a *Sati*⁵, and that I, the sole judge of the Punjab, am above any punishment. Let them through, my soldiers.'

Ashoka's men made way for them.

'May I ask something, noble Prince?'

'Speak.'

'Will you take us into your army?'

'So that you can betray us to the rebellious Takkas?'

'Lord, you may first test our loyalty. We ourselves are Takkas and Khasas, and will tell them that you are a fair judge who tolerates no injustice in Panchanada.'

'Good, get down from your horses. Now, kneel down on the road, bow your head in the dust towards the Far East where the holy Maharajah reigns, and repeat after me: 'I will serve the Maharajah of Aryavarta ... in Pataliputra ... Bindusara, until the day I die. For any word of betrayal ... that I ever speak ... any deed of betrayal ... that I ever commit ... I will voluntarily pay with my life.'

All repeated the oath, word for word.

'Then mount. You will ride in front of my horsemen.'

The army continued on its march after Ashoka had had the Khasa's weapons carefully stored in a carriage.

Kullika then asked the Prince: 'Is it safe to induct hostile rebels into the army?'

'You tell me. You know I always act swiftly and on the spur of the moment. I did not think about it. If I have failed, understand me well, it is

they who will be the victims.'

'In that case, you have fulfilled your duty to your Father, the Maharajah.'

'Yes.'

Ashoka's army crossed yet three more rivers of the Land of Five Rivers, the Punjab, and then went over the Salt Mountains that stretched out from the Indus to where the Sinara River leaves the southern foothills of the Himalayas. They form the southern border of the great bowl in which Taxila forms the centre. Just before they had reached Çakala, the Prince said:

'I believe, my Kullika, that I can trust the Khasas completely and can return their weapons to them. The people of Çakala are part of the Takkas, they are their own, and the Khasas will not find it pleasant to march through Çakala unarmed, as prisoners of war. I wish to spare them this indignity.

'I trust your intuitive insight, O, Prince. But if the citizens resist they could become quite dangerous to us.'

Ashoka paused for a moment. 'I must allow it, my Kullika.'

At the last camp before Çakala, Ashoka rode up to the dark-skinned riders.

'Get down from your horses, my Khasas.'

They leapt off their animals and looked at the Commander questioningly.

'Get your weapons.'

'Lord ... our weapons? Do you dismiss us from your army?'

'No, Sangala, I wish to regard you as my loyal soldiers, and thus to be armed.'

With folded hands, the Khasas fell to their knees and bowed their heads deeply to Ashoka. Sangala approached him and kissed the hem of his dress.

'Your trust in the Khasas will never be belied, noble Prince Ashoka.' He then turned to the men.

'Take up your weapons, for Prince Ashoka and for the Maharajah!'

An amazed Kullika looked at the changed demeanour of the Khasas.

'I believe you had the right insight, O, Prince.'

'I hope so, my Kullika.'



THE TORCH THAT LIT THE REVOLT

A serious discussion was going in the new council of Taxila, a city of flourishing trade and commerce.

‘Bindusara *Amitraghata*¹ has the strongest army in the world,’ remarked one of the ministers.

‘Maharajah Bindusara is getting old,’ stated Virata, a descendant of an erstwhile conquered dynasty of powerful kings, who had incited the people of the city to revolt. The revival of his kingdom was of more importance to him than peace in Taxila.

‘But his son, the Crown Prince?’

Virata smiled. ‘If Bindusara’s eldest son comes, we will not have need of any soldiers. We will take along an army of beautiful maidens from Kosala. They will surely vanquish him.’

‘The situation is far too grave for levity. Our restless Taxilans could kill Bindusara’s officers because of your instigation and that of the Bactrians’, who badly tolerate Indian monarchs ruling the lands that once belonged to their Greek overlords. The army from Pataliputra will come! And who is to say that the Emperor will not send the Wild Prince!’

‘He certainly will not do that. If Prince Ashoka conquers the Punjab he will threaten Pataliputra just as his grandfather Chandragupta did. And, as in the past, the westerners will not refrain from destroying the swaggering easterners. He will not send the Wild Prince.’

‘You have set much at stake, Virata!’

‘Not if Syria helps. The Greeks are much better warriors than those from the Plains of the Ganga. Think of the Macedonian.’

‘Was it not Seleukos who in return for five hundred elephants had to hand over not only his lands but also his daughter to the first Maurya?’

‘Chandragupta, yes! He had the wildness of the western Himalayas in his blood. Bindusara is getting old. Now is the time! Now! Or, have I lit the torch of revolution against Pataliputra in vain? Have the Taxilans only for sake of pastime been breaking the backs of the officers from Pataliputra, who loathe the West but not its treasures? Aryans, merchants, scholars, Shudras, all wished to be free of them. The Takkas in the upper Punjab have followed our example.’

‘In which Virata has had no small part.’

‘I hate the Mauryas! The Khasas will help us. Together with Syria we can hold off the easterners. Now is the time!’

‘Will Syria help? Do you trust the Bactrians²? By using Greeks are you not setting free a lion amongst the cattle? I prefer a Maurya in distant Pataliputra over Iranians within our city-walls. The revolt has been foolish. Now we can expect a reprisal from the Maharajah. Or else, being ruled by the Greeks. What will then become of our prosperity?’

‘You are only concerned about the interests of commerce,’ Virata reproached the minister.

‘And you of your lineage, but the rock of Taxila is no Kailash and neither are you Shiva who never was conquered.’

‘Who was it who restored peace, brought commerce and trade back, arranged fair levies, formed an army, brought the Takkas over to our side? Certainly, I lit the torch of revolution up to Pataliputra. Do you now want to howl like the cowardly jackals in the woods? I thought that the Taxilans, whose caravans traverse the whole world, in whose capital a most renowned university is located and where people have more liberal views on religion and governance than in Pataliputra, were devoid of the submissive docility of the eastern tribes. I appointed you all as ministers

and expect your support. The Maharajah's officers knew their Emperor to be far away and did not fear his stern hand. We shall supervise the levy of taxes ourselves instead of allowing it to vanish into the treasuries of the greedy men from Pataliputra.'

At that moment, the arrival of Nanda—one of Virata's spies disguised as a merchant—was announced. Virata sprang to his feet, surprised. 'Bring him in!' And to Nanda: 'You have already returned?'

'Yes, Lord, my camel walks quickly and was only laden with light muslin from Kashi and jewels from *Singala*.³'

'What tidings do you have in store for us?'

'A month ago Prince Ashoka left Pataliputra with all four divisions of his army.'

'The Wild Prince!' A collective alarm swept over the council.

'Yes, Sire. On the way I met a brahmacharin, Shakuni, who had been sent to Taxila by Devaka, a priest from Pataliputra, because he himself was injured. Devaka had urgent messages.'

'Where is Shakuni?'

'He travelled more slowly than I did, Lord.'

'How large is Ashoka's army?'

'Shakuni says it is merely a small band of hardy warriors. And it will be easy to destroy or imprison both, the army and its commander, in one single battle.'

'Who will take the cord of death and wind it around his own neck!' interjected one of the ministers. The remark did not perturb Virata.

'When will Ashoka be here, Nanda?'

'In Indraprastha they say Prince Ashoka is quick as lightning, like Shiva himself. So, he can be here whenever he wants, appearing out of thin air if he chooses. They tell wondrous stories about him: He killed the strongest elephant of Pataliputra with a ray, shot from his eye ... he has lightning strike wherever he wants ... a magician, who wanted to destroy him, disappeared and was banished to hell with a wave of his hand. The priest Devaka urges Taxila to destroy Ashoka and his army in one resolute battle. Then Prince Sumana, protégé of the gods, will be sent. Prince Ashoka is as cruel as a rakshasa and impatient as a cobra.'

'Devaka must have meant that Sumana is the protégé of the Brahmins and Taxila has to do his dirty work. It is far better if the Brahmin-court of

Pataliputra with their thousands of gluttonous priests were to roast their own rice.'

'So, you would rather let Taxila be destroyed by the Wild Prince!'

'He who strikes at one honeybee with a stick will soon have the whole swarm to deal with. It would be better to lure it with a pot of honey.'

'A merchant would rather have a dirty hand than a hole in his pocket full of gemstones!'

'A Kshatriya will guard a single gate more easily with his sword than a whole city with his sense!'

Angry voices were heard at the entrance to the council chamber. A man looking like an ascetic had made his way undetected through the park. Gaining entry into the council chamber of Virata's palace, he had eavesdropped on the discussions without being noticed. Finally, a guard saw him and sprang upon him, dragging him away.

'I must speak to Virata!' cried Revata, struggling.

'A spy! Here, grab him!'

'This is Virata's palace, is it not? Tell him that a messenger coming from Shakuni wishes to speak to him immediately. The safety of Taxila depends on it.'

Revata was allowed to come in. He brought his hands together and raising them, bowed deeply to Virata, the leader of the revolt.

'Sire, Shakuni, Devaka's brahmacharin, wants you to know that Ashoka's small army approaches rapidly. If you wish to defy the Prince, equip a well-trained army because Ashoka is a warrior with more than earthly power and he knows neither fear nor mercy.'

'How does Shakuni know this?'

'From the priest Devaka.'

'Can Devaka be trusted?'

'He hates Ashoka more fiercely than he honours Sumana.'

'One whose thoughts are controlled by hate is not to be trusted,' said one of the ministers.

'Devaka may pluck his own coconuts from the high treetop!'

'Lord, I have completed my mission. Please allow me to depart safely from this place.'

Revata sped unhindered and without delay along the Emperor's Road.

The merciless Prince! He, Virata, would be the first victim: Roasted, the leader of the revolt, or flayed alive or burned, starting with his feet ...

‘Taxila’s army is ten times as large as that of the Wild Prince!’ Virata burst out.

‘You know, Virata, in Pataliputra there are a hundred-fold more who are itching to plunder and then wipe out our trade-city from the Punjab! One does not hold out one’s bare feet before the jaws of an enraged snake!’

‘What treasures will suffice to quell the rage of the Mauryan Prince?’ Virata rasped bitterly.

‘Better it is to sacrifice the golden roof of the palace than its foundations!’

‘I would rather seek out the Bactrians than allow myself to be flayed by that Maurya.’

‘Then we will tell him that the most dangerous rebel has fled and hopes to bring the pagan Greeks into India,’ remarked one of the ministers cynically.

‘You would rather sacrifice me as a scapegoat to the so-called Shiva - incarnate, so that you yourself will not be served up as a sacrifice,’ Virata retorted.

The senior-most minister now took over:

‘Noble Virata, you have brought peace back to Taxila. Restore the now peaceful city back to the Maharajah. Emperor Bindusara will be grateful to you. Those who killed the king’s officers may either suffer the consequences or flee. They have ample time; Pataliputra’s army cannot reach our city in less than two or three months. If Prince Ashoka destroys Taxila then he destroys the Maharajah’s treasury. And who would kill a cow when he wants milk, who sets the forest aflame when he needs timber! Along with Taxila he would annihilate all the knowledge that radiates from here to all of Jambudvipa. Our army is not weak but is still that of a wretched rat while that of Bindusara’s is that of an elephant. Let us wait and hear what Shakuni has to tell us. I do not know Devaka, who is a Brahmin from the capital. We could ask the Maharajah to send us Sumana as the viceroy. The Brahmins of Pataliputra apparently regard him as the wisest man to rule our land. The governance of our city certainly has need of some wisdom.’

Vimalamitra’s words found approval.

‘The Wild Prince will laugh at your words, Sir! If we destroy Ashoka along with his few warriors, then what will an old Maurya or a weak-of-flesh Crown Prince do, providing Antiochos helps us with an army.’

‘Who lures the lion to the cattle pen, noble Virata? Remember that the lion can slash with his claws at the master as well.’

‘And who lures a wild elephant? If you let him in then I will have to tame him or render him harmless.’

A lamenting, wailing crowd! ... The steady beat of the *dhhol* ... cries of fear ... A new uprising in Taxila? Virata blanched. The ministers waited silently. A servant then appeared and threw himself wildly at Virata’s feet.

‘Lord ... Prince Ashoka Vardhana, the wild Maurya from Pataliputra, stands outside with an army on the road to Çakala. A battle carriage preceded by warriors is rolling towards the palace, and they are being followed by thousands of citizens.’

Virata made a move as if he was ready to flee.

The drumming and cries of the crowd came closer to the palace.

‘Let the envoys of the Prince come in,’ ordered Vimalamitra calmly. A moment later, Kullika arrived in the council chamber, followed by Prince Kala.

‘Who is the commander of Taxila?’ asked Kala sternly.

Virata stood up.

‘Taxila has rebelled against the Maharajah. Prince Ashoka orders you to send emissaries to hand over the city during the fourth *kalakramein*⁴,’ announced Kullika.

‘How large is the army of the Prince, Sir?’ asked Virata mockingly.

‘As large as he wants it to be. If you refuse he can recruit an army of millions from the fertile Punjab.’

‘Tell the Prince that the city’s government will appear before Prince Ashoka, before the appointed hour,’ said Vimalamitra, still calmly.

‘Prince Ashoka will wait until the fourth hour has passed.’

The envoys left. For a moment only one thought pierced the silence: How had the Prince managed to arrive so soon! Fear enveloped them. In one month Pataliputra’s army was standing before the rock of Taxila! It was impossible ... Unbelievable! Unless ...

‘Nanda did not exaggerate, ministers of Taxila. Do you wish to wage a war? With the grandson of Chandragupta? And risk the rage of the

Maharajah?’

‘Vimalamitra, what should we do?’

‘Tell him that the city will surrender to his command. Bring in more valuables than all those that we have taken from the Emperor’s officers. Place at the feet of the commander all that is beautiful and noble in Taxila. Summon the people to bring offerings of gifts for the Prince. Order the scholars of the university to swear an oath of fealty to the Maharajah. Throw yourself in the dust of the Emperor’s Road. I shall then try to convince him that we did not revolt against the Maharajah but against his avaricious officers.’

The ministers approved Vimalamitra’s proposal. He then stepped outside and raised his hand to the fear-stricken crowd that had gathered in front of the palace.

‘Listen, citizens of our prosperous Taxila. Virata and his ministers want the city to surrender to Prince Ashoka. Bring your gifts to gain his clemency, so that he will spare the city and its citizens. Gather your valuables and bring them here! We will offer them to him along with other treasures. Have your daughters pick flowers and strew them on the roads on which he will be passing along.’

Relief ... rejoicing as they depart. Large groups of cleaners sweep the streets and the road for more than a *yojana*⁵ ... Garlands of flowers are strung from house to house as a spontaneous procession makes its way to the camp site of Ashoka’s army. A restless shudder ripples through the crowd. The stateliness of the ministers with Virata at their head cannot suppress it, neither can the solemnity of the white attire of the scholars, reflected in the light of the sun, nor the pomp of the richly dressed merchants and other nobility, their wives in dresses embellished with gemstones and gold, or their daughters displaying their youth as their adornment. It is as if the swiftly evolving legends rising like the morning dew from the distant Ganga have floated over to the West, cooled by the impenetrable Himalayas and swept through the dense crowd that has gathered under the trees along the road, whispering, waiting, anxiously watching the roads for the feared envoy of the mighty Maharajah. He was a youth, a ferocious warrior. Lord of earth, air and light, like a broad-winged bird of prey suddenly descending upon their beautiful city, his prey. He whose will would determine the fate of Taxila ... the Wild Prince!

‘Who will be the ones sacrificed?’ asked Sanata, a rich merchant’s son, as the stately procession goes by.

‘He who instigated the rebellion!’ whispered his friend Kantala and he nods towards the head of the column.

‘And who will be the slaves?’

‘Maybe, he will be struck by the beauty of our girls; look there, out in the front, with their baskets full of flowers. Ah, see ... Surati! When he sees her he will be lost: lotus queen amongst the lotus blossoms ... her look, her movement, her grace. No, my Prince ...?’

‘If it had been Prince Sumana! He would have taken her and all the others as the spoils of war and certainly forgotten about the rebellion in our city.’

The other young men laughed quietly but even that caught the disapproving eyes of the on-lookers. ‘We are here for a more serious matter than you seem to understand, young men,’ said an old priest.

‘Lord, how do you know that Prince Ashoka is more interested in the face of a bitter penitent than that of the cheerful Taxilans?’

‘Your mockery hurts all who wait here with fear in their hearts wanting to know what will happen to the city and its inhabitants.’

‘No mockery, Lord, but the faith of the youth in the young Prince who is said to be as just and true as Shiva. We young ones honour the brave Prince who comes here with only a small army and thus shows faith in the West.’

‘Hah, the gifts, Kantala ... See how everything catches and reflects Surya’s rays. They glitter in gold and brass vases, full of jewels! Look! Cut diamonds, bars of beryl in golden sheaths, emerald and opal, topaz, light as honey, agate and ione ... such splendour!’

‘And there, those bowls carved from exquisite violet amethyst and of dark red garnet ... and goblets of glowing carbuncle ...’

‘There ... that big bowl ... the slaves can barely carry it ... deep red cornelian with a silver stem ... And that one there, one of pink-rose socon, filled with pearls from Singala and precious lapis lazuli.’

Necks craned to see the almost indescribable riches that were being carried past.

‘This gives the Taxilans joy ... Such rich luxury!’

‘And hope ... who knows? If the Wild Prince is charmed by all this beauty and finery he may be distracted from possible vengeful thoughts,’ whispered Kantala.

‘The Taxilans are good merchants,’ noted Santa, laughing. ‘Those twelve boys there carry the very finest *chowries*⁶, the fairest of yak-tails that the Himalayas have to offer. Fan the Prince ... that will refresh him after such a long journey!’

‘And extinguish his easily inflamed temper.’

A strong body of soldiers watches over the procession and the tension grows. Even the despised natives who have taken their place far behind the other onlookers feel the threat and remain silent.

‘Ashoka does not come to destroy Taxila, Virata. His army is too small.’

Virata wakes up from his angry thoughts. He has no wish to submit to the Mauryas. He cannot bear this cowardly servitude and the begging for one’s life because it destroys his hopes for the restoration of his kingdom.

‘You give him with his insignificant army the opportunity to strike us down in a most dishonourable way, Sir,’ burst out Virata bitterly.

‘Taxila can merely prosper with a powerful king. A weak king in Pataliputra is as bad for us as a king on the moon.’

‘You preach like a frog that is the king of the moat, to the stork. We do not want a Maurya, neither a weak nor a strong one. He will find me against him.’

‘Is Taxila or your kingdom the ante of your game of dice, my Virata?’

‘My life!’ rasps Virata.

‘Then you play rashly.’

Ashoka’s forces primed for war ... He, fierce of mien, on the largest royal elephant Dakada. Revata carrying the imperial parasol, the sacred emblem of the Maharajah; the slightest offence to this symbol will set Bindusara’s powerful army in motion. Covering the animal’s armour of iron is the Emperor’s richest royal-garment: clear blue silk upon which the heraldic emblem of the Mauryas, the peacock, is embroidered in threads of gold. The Prince in a shining white cloak, wearing a turban of Chinese silk with glittering jewels, and just like Shiva the razor-sharp brilliant chakra in his hand. Carts drawn by high-spirited horses with shining coats. Elephants of war armoured and threatening. Warriors heavily armed. Ominous. The

commander waits calmly for the procession to descend from the rock of Taxila along the Emperor's Road. The ministers fall to their knees, fold their hands, and bow their heads deeply to the son of the great Maurya. Vimalamitra greets him with a small bow. Virata stands straight.

'Noble and High Prince, the temporary government of Taxila has assigned me, Vimalamitra, as senior-most minister, to offer you our surrender. For a long time the officers sent here from Pataliputra to collect the legitimate taxes for the Holy Maharajah performed their duty but in the past years have not restrained themselves from seeking ever more, not for the Maharajah but for their own treasury. If any of us resisted we were punished mercilessly. The citizens of Taxila send their caravans far out into the land of the Greeks. Our trade makes our city rich and we gladly pay the tributary levies for these trades. But we refused to pay twice as much to the Emperor's officers. Many of Bindusara's most faithful subjects have been tortured, killed or imprisoned to force them to fill the treasuries of the collectors of which nothing has reached the Maharajah. The people of Taxila have always tolerated injustice poorly, O, mighty Prince. It is thus that they rose up, killed the cruel rulers and the people themselves reformed the government of the city and restored order and peace. Now, we offer you gladly, mighty army commander of the great Maharajah, our city and renew our oath of obedience to the rightful laws of the great Indian empire. Humbly we come to honour you and plead for a government such as the wise Maharajah, without doubt, has intended.'

'Why a criminal uprising, citizens of Taxila, and not, as is your right, making a case against the disloyal officers of the righteous Maharajah?'

'Whomsoever spoke of such was punished without mercy, O, Prince. Moreover, the officers assured us that the Maharajah would never protect the despised Punjab against his servants from Madhyadesa. He who came back unsuccessfully from Pataliputra, would be subjected to the most horrific revenge by the rulers of the West ...'

'You have shown little faith in my great Father!'

'The fear of the ruthless rulers was greater than the faith in the great Maharajah, far away in the East, O, Prince, just as the people of Taxila are more driven by their fear of nagas and dasyus, than by respect for Brahma.'

'And was there no fear of a fitting punishment by the Maharajah, Vimalamitra?' Ashoka noticed how the other Taxilan had trouble containing his temper.

‘How large is your army, commander?’ he suddenly interrupted the negotiations.

Ashoka looked sternly into the eyes of the audacious Kshatriya, Virata!

‘As large as I wish it to be, Virata. You have lit the spark of revolt in Pataliputra! How much of support have you asked from the Syrians and the Bactrians, Virata? I will determine the strength of my army based on that.’ Virata, struck dumb, remained silent. ‘You wanted to destroy me and my army, Virata! Did you think that you then would have conquered the Maharajah, you fool? What was your aim when you instigated the uprising against the holy Maharajah, and praised the nagas and dasyus in the Punjab as mightier than the gods of Madhyadesa?’

In his confusion and rage Virata forgot all discretion.

‘With what intention did you, Prince Ashoka, become the unlawful commander of the army instead of the Crown Prince and dare to demand accountability from me?’

‘The same reason why you feared neither the old Bindusara nor Prince Sumana, you, rebel against my Father!’

A chakra hissed like a bolt of lightning from the royal elephant down upon the proud son of a Raja and separated his head from his torso.

‘Take his body away and throw it to the vultures!’

A shiver runs through the kneeling rows. The news that Ashoka’s mighty eye has killed Virata spreads along the road to Taxila like the fleeting flame from a jungle fire in the season of Jyeshtha. Shock and alarm pulsed through the crowds. Sanata and Kantala went pale.

‘You see, the Prince spares no one. Do you think yourself to be safe now?’ asked the priest.

‘The choice is more striking to me than the deed, Lord,’ noted Sanata.

Ashoka does not want panic.

‘What do you have to say to me now, devout Vimalamitra? Has this Taxilan government imprisoned and punished the insurgents?’

‘Lord, some have fled, some were killed; the fate of others is unknown.’

‘And what does Taxila expect of me?’

‘We bring you offerings from the whole population, O, High Prince; we offer you our obedience and loyalty and want to bring you into our city as army commander. We hope then that peace and prosperity will return and justice will prevail, without which Taxila cannot live.’

Vimalamitra nods to the bearers who lay all the glittering, glistening, colourful valuables at the feet of Ashoka's elephant. The young Prince looks with admiring eyes at all of the treasures that this rich merchant city has gathered for him in a matter of a few hours.

‘Are the treasures, which the rulers took for themselves, among these?’

‘No, O, Prince, this is the personal offering of the Taxilan people to their new Lord so that he may be pleased, just as the gods look upon those who offer, with friendly eyes.’

‘Even when they who sacrifice have deeply offended and insulted the gods?’

‘The offering, the hope of the offering, the joy of the offering, Lord, is proof that one has searched within his own heart and then the gods will forego their vengeance. We beg you, army commander of the great Maharajah, to treat us likewise.’

‘Well, honourable Vimalamitra, I do not desire revenge. If I had wanted to punish the Taxilans and the Khasas, I would have brought an army capable of cleansing your city and the land of the Takkas of all rebelliousness. You wish to be loyal subjects to my father Bindusara. I wish to believe you, and through you, the city of Taxila. Prove to me your earnest desire. I will set one condition: That all the goods, money and valuables that have been taken from the murdered employees are brought to the palace tomorrow.’

Vimalamitra bowed deeply before the Maurya Prince. A great joy filled him and he thought to himself: Was this a savage? Taxila had dreaded an unreasonable punishment for an unreasonable deed. Ashoka demands justice. Can he do anything other than answer with justice? The citizens may speak for themselves!

‘I thank you, noble Prince; I invite you to follow us to the most beautiful city in the Punjab. Will you allow me to announce to the citizens that they have been accepted in mercy?’

Ashoka merely nods and Vimalamitra gives his orders.

A number of the city's servants go ahead and one steadily cries out in a loud voice: ‘The noble Prince Ashoka accepts the city with mercy ... The noble Prince Ashoka accepts the city with mercy ...’

An overpowering emotion swept through the crowds. The tension, heightened by Virata's death, is suddenly eased away from them. A great

joy overcomes them. The procession starts: The ministers, Bindusara's great Imperial elephant with Ashoka on it, looking fierce, a shining new chakra in his hand, under the beautiful canopy. A shower of flowers of white, blue, pink and red descends before the Prince. The fine fragrance of the flowers wafts up to greet him together with the warm feelings. The steadfastness of the young commander radiates through his bearing and through the equally steady march of his small but fearsome army.

No one notices the interest with which Ashoka takes in the strange blend of races and clothing in their colourful diversity, while riding so confidently and steadfastly between the rows of Taxilans: Merchants from distant lands, scholars, dark figures of natives, girls in white and red robes strewing flowers and themselves adorned by flowers. With respectful reserve each one calls out well-wishes to the new ruler, who looks around silently, swaying with the steps of the proud elephant Dakada. Melodic flutes and rhythmic drums play their slow reverent melodies. Throughout the city, along the road the crowd protrudes from all openings and rooftops, anxious to get a glimpse of this Prince who had been awaited with such fear. And as he approaches, the touching cries of 'Hail Ashoka!' greet him warmly.



THE HOUSE OF SUSMILA

Virata's people had left the palace so they could welcome the new Lord. Ashoka immediately put his own sentry in place.

'I am here whenever you need advice, honoured Vimalamitra. Prince Kala will arrange for the administration of the city on my orders. Ministers appointed by Virata will carry on for the time being; I know they are kindly disposed to me. Furthermore, I wish to be informed which foreigners are residing here and of those who enter and leave the city. Today, all the weapons of your soldiers will be collected and brought to my palace. By law they belong to the Maharajah. As of now the army of Taxila is discharged. Tomorrow, I will receive from you a precise account of the taxes that are levied here. Apart from that, everything should go on as usual.'

'It will be difficult to do all this in so short a time, O, Prince.'

'How many ministers do you have?'

'Seven, Sire.'

'Each will be given charge of one department ... Sela and Sagka, are the soldiers being taken care of?'

'They are, Sire. The grounds offer abundant space.'

'And the officers?'

‘The city council has dispatched many officers who are arranging billets for our troops.’

‘Be watchful of betrayal. Weapons at the ready so that no single event occurs unforeseen! Be vigilant over food. For the time being none of my soldiers in the city!’

‘Lord, Revata has gone out disguised as a yogi; I saw he was darkening his face.’

‘Send him here when he returns.’

The next day, porters and beasts of burden appeared with the valuables and treasures that had been stolen from Bindusara’s employees. At that moment Ashoka understood the source of anger and indignation among the Taxilans and why they had rebelled.

‘Honoured Vimalamitra, let it be made known that everyone who has been aggrieved by the disloyal officers will determine what his losses have been. We shall return what was unlawfully taken.’

The ministers rose silently as one, their hands folded, bowing deeply to the Prince who dared to acknowledge the cause for the uprising.

‘Many foreign merchants who have long since left the city cannot reclaim the surplus taxes that they paid, O, righteous Prince.’

‘Take this into account then, wise Vimalamitra: I would like to receive a list of the scholars who live in this city.’

Vimalamitra bowed deeply.

‘Your interest in the lives of the Taxilans moves us deeply, O, Prince.’

‘Did you expect anything different, Sir?’

‘We thought that Madhyadesa had the deepest contempt for Panchanadidesha¹. Justice did not exist for the land west of the Sarasvati.’

‘The Maharajah’s officers are not my Father himself.’

‘We had only them to deal with, O, Prince. The people of Taxila consider themselves to be a rich and independent people who know the world better than those in Pataliputra. A great many of those who live here do so without honouring the varnas, without knowledge of the Vedas nor the accompanying sacrifices. What they do know is that the East has drawn a border between them and the West: the desert and the Sarasvati. That is why many keep trying to approach the Syrians and wish to free themselves of the East which merely uses us like a mango that is squeezed for its rich

juice. The old clans of kings had hopes of reclaiming their power. They revolted against the avaricious officers.'

'I thank you for your frank words, honoured Vimalamitra. My Father hardly knew that the cause lay there. It is certain that he did not want these circumstances.'

'I fear that Panchanadi will never be at peace as long as Pataliputra views it as a land of the godless and the damned.'

'What do you think will bring peace to the Punjab?'

'If the Maharajah will permit us to be governed by a viceroy who understands and appreciates life in the West. One who through wise measures will let the people know that their lives are precious, their way of life is respected, their land and property recognised as it is in Madhyadesa. He who wants to rule the West must realise that it is not like a shut-off family circle surrounded by high walls of varna or a rigid moral code, which can be easily subjected to the arbitrary will of the Maharajah's officers. Our people are acquainted with the customs and mores of the Egyptians, the Iranians, the Babylonians, the Greeks. After all, the gods of Madhyadesa are not the gods of the world. The diverse views from far-off lands cross paths constantly here with those of the Aryans. For us, the world outside India is different but not worse because of it. To isolate oneself from the rest of the world leads to narrow-mindedness.'

'You may be right, Sir. But Kautilya was a Taxilan; Chandragupta came from the western Himalayas.'

'No ruler, however mighty, can prevent narrow-mindedness and frustration if he lets his people be downtrodden by a priestly class which expects the people to revere them as the only ones with knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is not the spiritual possession of any one varna, it is the possession of all mankind. The wise are not those who have learned the Vedas, the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, but those who penetrate into the true meaning of life.'

Ashoka looked at Vimalamitra with surprise.

'You are a Brahmin!'

'I am human, O, Prince.'

Ashoka pondered the minister's words for a long time and thought to himself: Who could ever govern over India with such wisdom? Who would be that unifying force that could bind such diverse ideas? Who could

nurture the shoots of a centuries-old *bodhi* tree and help them grow together towards one huge crown? Who, the striving of all people towards one god? A thousand of peoples obeyed the one Maharajah of Pataliputra. How could that one Maharajah understand thousands of peoples and lead them? Was it the tributary tax system that was of importance or was it the power of the Maharajah? Which gods ruled: those of Madhyadesa or those of the Punjab? Or, those of the Greeks or Egyptians?

Prince Kala and the ministers received the Taxilans who had been defrauded by the Maharajah's officers, determined their losses, and awarded them compensation. The people were impressed and overcome by admiration. They had pictured war, siege, looting, killing expeditions of conquering war-lords, the most advanced systems of torture for the instigators of the uprising. Yet, the Prince had not punished them; rather, he had let justice be done, overruling the arrogant employees of the most powerful Maharajah!

When Ashoka and Kullika rode through the streets, seated high on the back of Dakada, protected by the Emperor's parasol, no expressions of cheer rose from the groups of people. All of them, however, displayed a deep feeling of respect towards him after having their peaceful trust restored.

Ashoka took in the sights of the city with obvious awe: houses of stone, architecture of another world. He stopped before one house built completely from natural stone, whose columns of stone and capitals with leaf motifs supported the roof, architraves with relief depicting scenes he did not even understand. The owner of the house, who had noticed him early on, went outside through the gallery, folded his hands over his head, and bowed deeply before the Prince.

'Will it please the righteous Prince to look at Susmila's house?'

'Susmila, I looked at your house because it was not built from the wood in my Father's forests, but from stone ... who can make building materials from hard stone? How do the pillars support such heavy weight and not cave in?'

'Stone immortalises architecture, O, Prince; neither gnawing ants nor fiery flames can destroy it. It would be a great honour for me if the commander of the Maharajah's army should wish to see my house.'

'I would be pleased to, honourable Susmila.'

Susmila showed him around his house with pride. First, the inner court, with a fountain with sculptures from strange countries and in niches figurines created from white stone from the land of the mighty Macedonian. There were strange god-figures from Egypt, silent and contemplative figures hiding in the niches; vases of delicately coloured porcelain, appearing to be casually placed where they would enchant the eye. Here and there were flowers whose brilliant colours enhanced their demure beauty; expensive carpets from Iran and Arachosa, placed on the floors or hung over some low dividing walls; artistic metal objects from Kashi ... They were a feast to his eyes.

‘Works of art, O, Prince, from many countries whose caravans come into Taxila.’

‘I have never seen so many strange and beautiful objects in one place. Does not your own beliefs—or your priests—forbid you from placing these heathen gods in your Aryan house?’

‘Sire, a sculpture is no god; it is a material form of the idea. Is that which is shaped by foreign artists’ hands of less value than the art that is shaped by the Aryans? Is the spirit of the Iranian, the Greek, the Egyptian, the Chinese, not the same—the atman of that eternal Atman—as is ours?’

‘The spirit of your house is beautiful as your own spirit is, Susmila.’

‘Mine is no different from that of the inhabitants of the most distant lands, no different from that of every animal, every plant ... *Tat Tvam Asi!* Then shall I divide what the eternal unites in one great spirit? Should I not unite what the greedy world divides out of ignorance?’

‘Who is it who divides?’ asked Ashoka, genuinely pensive about what he just heard.

‘The priests of Madhyadesa, O, Prince. They who have identified the Sarasvati and the desert as the borders of their holy world and reject the Punjab, which is in the west.’

‘Then who does not unify them?’

‘The Maharajah if he, too, classifies his lands as holy and unholy or his people as some to be exalted and others to be damned, according to the laws of the priests.’

Ashoka smiled. ‘And you think that the Maharajah divides his empire in this way?’

‘No, Sire. For then he would not have sent you!’

‘You flatter me and thus the Maharajah.’

‘Sire, I do not wish to flatter you, but I would like to state that the Maharajah by sending you, has filled all in Panchadesha with joy.’

‘May Varuna bless your beautiful house, my Susmila, in which is personified a diversity that breathes unity.’

‘Sire, your words make me happy. I offer you this house as an expression of honour to your sense of justice, as a symbol.’

Ashoka looked at Susmila, who was humbly waiting.

‘My Susmila, I have a great palace at my disposal and am thus not in need of your house. I can hardly accept the home of another.’

‘Much more than this house was returned to me, Sire, and I have still others in Taxila.’

‘Then I will gladly accept it from you, Susmila.’

Ashoka rode through the streets of Taxila for a long time.

‘What is it that strikes you most about the West, Kullika?’

‘That the Taxilan is closer to the wisdom of Sayana, while Pataliputra is closer to the rigidity of Richika.’

‘And yet, ... Jambudvipa requires something more than the wisdom from the hermitage.’

When Ashoka arrived at the palace, he quickly summoned Gopa to appear before him. Her flowering beauty had come back to her; in her face a youthful crimson red gleamed through the duskiness of her hue and her movements were once again agile; truly a characteristic of the western bough of the Aryan race. Ashoka watched her keenly. Her large glowing eyes were directed at her rescuer with intense softness. She had thought long about what would become of her ... Slavery? Humiliation? At first she actually thought that Shiva had saved her, later that he was a wild Kshatriya, taking her for a wife. When she at last heard that it was the Wild Prince of Pataliputra who had saved her from the funeral pyre, she knew that no selfish reason had motivated him. Which Maharajah’s son would want a widow, the most reviled woman in Madhyadesa, for himself? She was certain that any woman—the most beautiful one—could be his if he wanted.

‘What does the beautiful Gopa think should become of her? It is not likely that you would wish to return to your native land.’

‘No, Lord! But with a joyous heart I will accept whatever you decide.’

‘What is it that you expect from life?’

‘When I had to take Kasaka as my husband in spite of my vehement protests I knew that the terrible fate of being a widow without children awaited me. But Kasaka wanted me to perish on the pyre, too. Then I fought with Yama. For my life. And you have saved it, O, Prince. Whatever you wish will be my pleasure. I will even serve as a slave. My life is yours, Lord.’

‘And if I gave you freedom to choose, what would you choose?’

‘I would want to be of service to you, O, Prince.’

‘Well now, Gopa, I have been given a house by Susmila, a rich merchant of Taxila. You may live there. You may decide how you wish to serve me.’

‘Sire, thank you for trusting me.’

Ashoka had spent day after day consulting with Vimalamitra and other ministers on how to forestall in the future such situations as had developed so recently. Everyone had come to understand that neither ministers in Taxila nor viceroys and officers from Pataliputra could guarantee that the past would not be repeated. Then, the Prince recalled what Susmila had said of his stone house.

‘Listen, my Vimalamitra, I will have a pillar made of indestructible polished stone. On it will be engraved edicts, about what taxes are to be paid and how much; which portion of the merchant’s goods and from the harvest will be set aside for the Maharajah. We shall establish rules which are not to be violated, and anyone who reads these edicts will know. The people will then no longer suffer losses.’

Ashoka now wanted to move on northwards in order to subdue the Takkas.

‘Sangala, we are going to your friends, the Takkas.’

‘Sire, if you will trust me with the mission, I will announce to the Kashiya that you have arrived.’

‘I fear, Sangala, that the warriors of Kashmira, Darada of Udjana, and Kamboja, will then swoop down upon Taxila to take me away as prisoner.’

‘They are wiser, O, Prince. We shall tell them who you are.’

‘You ask much trust from me, Sangala.’

‘Only as much as we need and are worthy of.’

‘Well now, Sangala, take your warriors and go. When the moon is born again I will expect you back and we will go together.’

‘Lord, I and other Takkas, feel fortunate that you send us on this mission. We shall bring the other warriors in the mountains and valleys of the upper Punjab the same joy that you have brought us.’

When Sangala had departed, Ashoka asked: ‘What do you think of my decision, my Kullika?’

‘I no longer think, Prince. I wish I knew why every measure you take strikes the target with more precision than we had ever dared to imagine!’

Ashoka laughed. ‘There is no why, but only wherefore. It is from you that I learned the meaning of *‘Tat Tvam Asi’*, my Kullika.’

‘Why must Gopa live in the beautiful house of Susmila, my Prince?’

‘Can I let her, a free Arya, stay here along with my slaves?’

‘No, O, Prince.’

‘And in my lodging place?’

‘No.’

‘Or, in a separate part of the palace?’

‘Even less.’

‘Do you think, Kullika, that I had her saved only to have her lead a miserable life here?’

‘No, Lord, we know you better.’

‘Well, then, let her live in that beautiful house which was offered me. Let her be happy there. And she may yet be of service to us. The victory that I gained here is a lucky one; the battle that yet awaits me may be perilous. I wish to shape my own dice for the big throw, Kullika.’



13

THE VENGEANCE OF THE CRIPPLED PRIEST

Just then, Revata returned from his survey of the city.

‘Lord, I saw a crippled priest in the streets of Taxila.’

‘Aha! So, Devaka took the risk of following me.’

‘Yes, Lord, I know where he lives with Shakuni.’

‘He has arrived a little late to do me any harm yet here. Warn Prince Kala!’

Early the next morning Revata appeared at Devaka’s house, staff and begging-bowl in hand, loudly entreating the occupants to increase their store of good karma by giving alms to a poor penitent. Devaka turned attentive and let Revata inside.

‘Where do you come from, yogi? And what are you looking for in Taxila?’

‘From Kosala, Lord. My father was a Brahmin, my mother a Shudra. I am visiting all the holy cities to purify myself.’

‘It is not safe for you here.’

‘Prince Ashoka has restored peace to the city, Lord.’

‘But has inflamed the fury of the gods!’

‘Citizens praise Indra, Varuna and Brihaspati, but mostly Shiva, that Prince Ashoka has come. The sacred snakes and trees get twice as many offerings. He has restored peace in Taxila without any bloodshed.’

‘Who dares to praise those who murdered and pillaged high Brahmin officers and went unpunished! Where is the justice? Yes, one can only expect such disregard for the laws from one who has wrongfully usurped the highest power for himself.’

‘You are right, Lord, but the Maharajah himself sent him.’

‘Deceitful advisors ... or fear of the Wild Prince!’ hissed Devaka. ‘Someone not true to his faith, who protects even those that scorn ...’

‘Is that what Prince Ashoka does, Lord?’

‘Worse, he violates the law here as he did in Pataliputra. What will become of Bindusara’s great empire if he should become the King? Prince Sumana is the Crown Prince, patron of the Brahmins and the law. He obeys the gods of Madhyadesa.’ Devaka’s voice dropped: ‘He would have imposed the will of the gods on this cursed land and ensured the performance of appropriate sacrifices instead of allowing offerings to snakes and trees.’

‘You could be right, Lord. What can one do to bring the deluded back on the right path?’

‘Prince Sumana should be the viceroy, and there should be a large army. The sacred teachings of the Vedas and the right sacrifices must be restored. Brahmins from Pataliputra should be brought in to chase away the sinful customs in the land of the *Rig Veda*, like Surya does the thick morning mist. Does one honour the Brahmins here? One barely observes the varnas! Heretics may live freely here. Are the Vedas held in reverence? Does Prince Ashoka ensure the sacrifices? Does he himself perform them?’

‘Lord, you are right. I hear that he even interrupted a Sati ceremony at a funeral pyre on his way here. A woman was to be burned along with her dead husband and become a Sati. He snatched her from the pyre.’

‘What you say ... You see, to whom the interests of India have been entrusted.’

Revata now narrated the story about Gopa and also mentioned where she was living now. And as Revata returned day after day with stories, Devaka began to trust the penitent more and more, especially when Revata

informed him that the Prince had sent an armed force of Takkas to subjugate the northern Punjab and that Ashoka was to go along as well.

‘When will the Prince depart? I would like to know.’

‘Maybe, I could ask.’

Revata often visited Gopa as well.

‘Do you wish to serve Ashoka, Gopa?’

‘As much as I can, Revata.’

‘Then try to discover what that dangerous priest Devaka has planned. He will be coming to visit you, be assured of that.’

‘I will be happy to help, in any way I can.’

A repetitious droning from the road came to Devaka’s dwelling: ‘The Dasyus are threatening the Punjab ... the Dasyus are threatening the Punjab ... the Dasyus are threatening the Punjab ...’

‘What is it that voice is calling out, Shakuni?’

‘That the Dasyus are threatening the Punjab.’

‘They are the wild tribes living in the mountains! Tell that man to come here!’

An old man thus climbed onto the verandah, his long, gray hair dishevelled, sporting a beard, his skin weathered, with rags wrapped around his midriff and right shoulder.

‘Who threatens the Punjab, honourable Sannyasin?’

‘The Dasyus, the celestial Dasyus! Every year I climb the Himalayas to seek the heavenly palace of Shiva and Parvati, scale Mount Meru the abode of the gods, to bathe in the sacred lakes the Manasa, to cleanse myself of my sins. And that is when I see it. In the valley of the Shygar and the Shyok the water rises, higher each year. Soon, the dam will break and the waters will overflow and flood Panchanada.’

‘When?’

‘I do not know, Lord. When the Dasyus have filled the lake.’

‘How long will it take to journey there?’

‘A very long time.’

‘Do you know the route?’

‘Yes, Lord, it is the route that the caravans use and goes through Kashmir and the Hymavant to the northern lands, across the Indus ...’

‘How do you travel?’

‘On foot, but it is quicker riding on the hardy donkeys from the Oxus Valley.’

‘How big is the lake?’

‘Infinitely long and endlessly deep. The far shore is really far ...’

‘And the dam?’

‘The dam, Lord, is of frozen water. It comes from a side valley, slowly and steadily, barely to be seen by the eyes. There it grows, broad and mighty, before the waters of the Shygar, Lord. And the water of the lake rises—as it has been doing for years—till the dam breaks. The Indus will swell and flood over the meadows and the farmlands of the Aryans, submerging everything in its path.’

‘Who will break that dam?’

‘Only the angry Dasyus. Or Shiva, Lord of death.’

‘Show me, Sannyasin, show me! We will hire donkeys from the Valley. How many people will it take to break the dam?’

‘Only the gods and the Dasyus can do it, Lord. When the angry Dasyus want something terrible to happen, they will send the rain, melt the snow and ice, and finally break up the enormous dam.’

‘Yes, yes, the Dasyus’ Or, the Brahmins!

That will be the revenge of the gods! Devaka’s preaching against the Taxilans became more threatening from this day on. He warned of the disaster that threatened the Indus valley if the citizens did not bow before the Vedic gods. The dams in the empire of the gods would break and raging mountains of water would burst forth over the richly covered fields of harvest. Caravans would be washed away ... All this will happen if the Taxilans did not repent.

A new threat? From the gods? From the holy mountains whose bare, sky-high peaks supported Shiva’s home? Did Prince Ashoka also know about this?

‘What danger, Lord?’

‘The vengeance of the gods!’

‘Vengeance for what?’

‘For the violation of their laws, the neglect of their rituals and sacrifices, the abuse of their priests!’

‘Be careful, priest, you know of Virata’s fate! Leave Taxila, priest, Prince Ashoka will mistrust us again!’

‘Silence!’ cried one of the passers-by loudly. ‘What laws have been violated? What sacrifices neglected? And which of the priests abused?’

‘Who is the Crown Prince of Indravarta? Will he be viceroy of Taxila?’ The bystanders looked at each other in consternation.

‘Who stopped a Sati on his way to subdue the rebellious Taxilans?’

‘Who?’

‘You know who! Do the men now ruling Taxila perform the rituals to the gods? Are the Brahmins honoured?’

‘The Brahmins! Ha, ha, ha! He wants us to crawl before the Brahmins like the people of Madhyadesa!’

‘The Vedas say ...’

‘Which Veda? Those that you distorted to benefit your own varna?’

Devaka kept silent. Was this not a cursed country! It would become a danger for the gods and people of Magadha and the Madhyadesa if the Wild Prince were to rule it!

‘Know what you do! You mock the Brahmins and the Vedas? The scourge of punishment which the gods of Aryavarta will inflict on you will be horrible! You fools are waving a flaming torch in the dry jungle during Jyeshtha. The Maruts will carry their blessings¹ far out, over and beyond your heads to the empire of the gods, and the Dasyus will gather them yonder, changing them into a force of destruction. Your harvests, your herds, your riches, your lands—all of it will be swept away in a deluge if you do not plead with the gods of Aryavarta, no, demand that the laws of the land of Manu be applied devoutly. And after this flood will follow another one, mightier than the first! The Dasyus will obliterate you!’

Many trembled with fear; others laughed.

‘The rock of Taxila rises far above the Indus!’

‘But the land! The Takkas! Your caravans! The Dasyus are displeased with the Aryans along the Indus. Do the will of the gods by oblations and sacrifices, then maybe they will avert this disaster.’

‘Bring offerings to the priests of Madhyadesa so that they can fill their bellies; offer them soma so that they speak the holy tongues!’ mocked a rough warrior from Pataliputra.

Subdued laughter rippled through the rows. Many who were not indifferent to the Vedas left silently.

‘Cursed is he who mocks the gods and scorns their commands! Indra will deny you the nectar of heaven, Vayu will release upon you icy winds from the holy regions of Nagaparva, and Brihaspati will destroy your house, if you continue to violate the law of the gods.’

‘The laws of the Brahmins of Madhyadesa!’

‘They are the same as you will realise too late! Within a month an untameable flood will rise to the rock of Taxila!’ Devaka left.

A dark shadow seemed to drift menacingly over the recently rescued city.

In the evening, Gopa spotted Devaka and Shakuni approaching her house and immediately she sent word to Ashoka. Devaka looked around disapprovingly of the house: built of stone, blasphemous sculptures, strange art, luxurious furnishings ... all belonging to a widow who refused to embrace sati.

‘You have lost yourself in sacrilegious and foolish surroundings, Aryan woman!’

‘Who are you, Sir, who expresses such a foolish judgement about one you do not know?’

‘I am a Brahmin priest from Pataliputra.’

‘On a pilgrimage?’

‘To protect this land and its people.’

Gopa smiled. ‘The accursed West?’

‘Do not Aryans live there, too?’

‘What man condemns, man will not protect.’

‘The Maharajah sent his son here.’

‘Do you wish to protect him?’

‘You know, do you not, that Prince Sumana was supposed to be the army commander?’

‘The Maharajah has sent Prince Ashoka.’

‘But the gods will denounce and ruin this land if Sumana is not appointed as the rightful viceroy! Do you think that they will allow a Prince who scorns the gods and their sacrifices to become the king? He, who does

not honour the sacrifices, will bring misfortune to the land. My curse is capable of destroying this land. Obedience to the Brahmins, or else ...'

'But if the priest demands what is impossible?'

'Do you wish to be the judge of that?'

'No. And yes, if I am to be the sacrifice.'

'You are not to judge the priest's decision. If you do, then your next life will bring so much misery that any sacrifice made now would appear preferable.'

'I have refused the sacrifice that a priest asked of me.'

'You should not have been allowed to refuse even if it was your life that he had asked.'

'He did ask for my life, because my husband had paid twice as much to the priest if I were to die with him on the funeral pyre. Prince Ashoka saved me at the last moment.'

'Prince Ashoka has thrown you into perdition! He had no right to interfere in a sacred ritual.'

'Do you mean ...'

'The Prince was an army commander. He was not entitled to prevent the sacred offering of the priest.'

'But may another have the right to decide my fate?'

'It was the prerogative of the priest.'

'You think then, that Prince Ashoka, and I, too, have sinned greatly.'

'Countless miserable lives await you and the ghost of your husband will torment you.'

'Sir, how can I escape such a dire fate?'

'Serve the gods!'

'Who will tell me what the gods wish, Sir!'

'I, a Brahmin priest, who knows their will and can control them.'

'Tell me, Lord, what I should do!'

'The gods want Prince Sumana to be the viceroy of the Punjab. And that is what the Brahmins want because the sacred laws of Manu demand it! Thus, will you be released from your duty to Prince Ashoka and help me in our goal.'

'Sir, he did save me from a terrible death.'

‘He cannot save you from its miserable consequences. If I do not avert it.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘You will serve the gods or they will destroy you.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘The laws of Manu permit you a white lie if it is for the welfare of all. Why should you be grateful to a Prince who has brought misfortune down on you, one who has given you a house with heathen and graven images to live in! Prince Ashoka came here because his father feared him just as many Rajas before him had feared their wild sons. Ajatasatru murdered his father and his four heirs were all patricidal murderers ... all of them. Today, Prince Ashoka is on friendly terms with the rebels because his army is ridiculously small. His father did not trust him with a larger one. If Ashoka should ever become Maharajah he will be a scourge upon his country; pestilence and starvation will be the punishment of the gods. Indra will withhold the nectar of heaven. The Dasyus have stored up the empire’s rains and when the crops cover the farmlands the waters will burst in a deluge over the fields. Any friend of Ashoka is an enemy of the gods, no deed against him can be a sin. He who thwarts him will be praised; he who kills him is the greatest friend of the gods. There can be no crime too great against him, and a beautiful new birth will be the reward. Do you know, Gopa, who is Ashoka’s most loyal ally?’

Gopa betrayed none of her thoughts and her face displayed even now only fear and curiosity. ‘No, Sir.’

‘Prince Kala. He is worse than the Wild Prince. He did not hesitate to kill Brahmin priests! The gods know of no greater enemy. Redemption of all sins can be earned through destroying him. Soon, I will be leaving this unholy land and be gone for some time.’

‘Where are you going, Sir?’ asked Gopa, as if alarmed.

Devaka hesitated, but was convinced he had won over Gopa. A man is won by persuasion, a woman by fear of Dasyus, or hell, or miserable rebirths.

‘I am going to the land where the gods dwell, to mount Meru, high up in the mountains, where the Dasyus are preparing a fit punishment. And you, Gopa, must try to detect the plans of the Prince for the Brahmins. You will earn glorious rewards.’

‘Sir, I shall do everything to cleanse myself of my sins and please the gods.’

‘That is a promise not to be taken light, Gopa!’

‘But the Taxilans revere Ashoka!’

‘The Maharajah appoints the viceroy, not the Taxilans. We will see to it that the Emperor fears Ashoka’s being the viceroy. What is he doing here to build up a great power? How is he doing it, my Gopa? You will be allowed a white lie for the sake of the welfare of all,’ whispered Devaka in her ear. ‘Soon, you will go with me to Pataliputra to testify to the Maharajah about a force against him that is growing here in the Punjab. The gods have spared you for a sacred duty!’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Never let anyone—not even with one word—know that you have allied yourself with a Brahmin. I release you from your great sin if you serve the gods. Inveigle your way in with Ashoka’s ministers. Entice them. You are very beautiful, my Gopa. And warn them of the disasters that are awaiting them if Ashoka becomes the viceroy. I shall punish the Punjab if it transgresses. But the gods will praise the ones who punish their worst enemy, Prince Kala; his most horrible death will be their feast!’

‘What does Devaka need from me?’ It was Prince Kala, suddenly entering the hall. Devaka jumped. His look flashed unrestrained at the Prince. He took a few paces to the door and hissed: ‘Your welfare, Prince of Mayula.’

‘I understand that! Come, you walk very well, at least on one of your legs. And one of your arms moves excellently. Go and work for my welfare!’

With a conspiratorial look at Gopa, Devaka left the hall, head held high. Shakuni, who had not spoken a word but had almost been devouring Gopa with his eyes, followed him.

‘That is a dangerous enemy, that Brahmin.’

‘Dangerous to whom?’

‘To Prince Ashoka. And even more so to you, Prince Kala. The worst is what he has whispered to me. He wants to make the Maharajah afraid of the Prince and collect information that will disturb Bindusara. He wants to take me to Pataliputra to testify against my rescuer. A white lie is permitted! Why does he hate you even more than Prince Ashoka?’

Kala told Gopa what had happened in Mathura, the retribution in the jungle and the rescue by Shakuni.

‘He will not spare you and expects me to help the sacrificial priests!’ Gopa laughed. ‘But I will keep Madri’s fate in mind!’

‘We are here and not in Madhyadesa. There, they are not only the mediators between the gods and men, the unyielding guardians of their own interests, the advisors for the Vaishyas, providers of rain, sun, and drought, of spring and winter, but also the judges in the secret councils. They twist the legends and the sacred books in order to extend their power. They mercilessly persecute anyone who opposes their will. And Prince Ashoka is their greatest enemy. The Punjab to them is damned because it does not accept their domination. If Sumana becomes the viceroy of the Punjab then a large army will be sent, and his Brahmin advisors will not rest until they have established their ominous stranglehold in this land. Then, the Punjab will also be hallowed. Shakuni, the young man who leered at you so lustfully, violated his guru’s bed. That is how Devaka made him his slave. Devaka thinks that you, too, Gopa, are trapped in his clutches.’

‘Why did you not kill that monster?’

‘Ashoka forbade it. If I kill Devaka, another one will come from Pataliputra with even more hatred. The Prince merely wants to be certain that we are not deceived. He does not want to kill Devaka, he wants to know his plans.’

‘Lord, I refused to offer my life to Kasaka, but I am willing to offer it any time to the Wild Prince if I can be of service to him.’

Prince Kala stood up.

‘You are beautiful as Ushas and amiable as Sita, my Gopa. Do you know if the priest and his ‘pupil’ have not eavesdropped on our conversation?’

Gopa went pale, and Kala laughed.

‘Be careful, he will not believe you on the basis of a single talk just now. You need not be afraid. I have five soldiers with me who had orders to see the two off. But they will be back, that is why I will leave a guard behind.’

Devaka forced Shakuni into a life of servitude, but the young Brahmin who had dallied with the wife of his guru, felt his life to be a heavy burden.

Gopa had kindled his smouldering passion. He wanted to see her again and could barely wait until he had fulfilled his duties to Devaka. Long ago he had prepared a love potion from one of the best recipes: Kushta, blue lotus blossoms, a pair of bee wings, the roots of the Taalanka and the white Kakajangha, all dried and ground to a fine powder. He always carried it with him in a tiny silver box. If he sprinkled it upon the head of a woman, she would be bewitched and become his slave.

‘Beautiful Gopa, allow me to visit you once again. Later, I will not be able to talk to you.’

‘Who sent you?’

‘No one. I was struck by your beauty and the similarity of our fates.’

‘Similarity, you say?’

‘Yes, we both wish to serve Devaka to wash away our sins!’

‘Each of us will have to do that in our own different way, just as each of us sinned in our own way.’

‘Do you not find it hard to cut off your association with others, to fulfil Devaka’s wishes and spend all your energy on this? I long for a friend—a woman—who will also long for me.’

‘Why do you not look for one?’

‘I have found you, Gopa, as beautiful as the dawn over the holy Ganga. You are alone, I am alone. Why should we not comfort each other?’

He stood up, the box carefully hidden in his hand and, approaching her, sprinkled the powder with great care on her head without her noticing, and waited for it to take effect.

‘I am not in need of comfort.’

‘I am. I must travel far with Devaka, I will not see you for a long time.’

‘Where are you going, Shakuni?’

‘Beyond the Himalayas.’

‘Beyond!’

‘Yes. Past the Valley of the Indus, over the glaciers, where no animal can live, where no plant grows.’

‘Goodness, then stay here! What will you do in such places!’ said Gopa, affecting friendliness because she wanted to know.

Shakuni hesitated for a moment; the powder had started to work!

‘Devaka wants to see where the Dasyus collect the waters that will bring death and destruction. Sokota, a sannyasin, will guide us. Devaka will force the despicable Dasyus to deluge the Punjab with floods, as a punishment for their failure to acknowledge the gods. He has enormous power in his prayer. Will I have to keep yearning for your love for that long, my Gopa?’

‘You are a Brahmin, I am but a cursed Kshatriya-widow,’ said Gopa, pretending to be sad.

‘But Devaka will nullify all the curses!’

Shakuni now thought the potion had worked sufficiently. He approached her confidently and suddenly took her in his arms. Gopa pushed him away with force. He then muttered seven times an incantation that was meant to make a woman compliant in love. Gopa understood that she could only get rid of the young man by cunning. Revata, who had followed Shakuni and had heard the conversation started to make strange sounds in a nearby room.

‘Quiet! Shakuni, go immediately! Listen ... it is the ghost of my dead husband! When he was alive, he was as jealous as a tiger. Listen ... he approaches ... quickly leave the house. It will mean your life!’ Gopa had such a frightened face that Shakuni quickly disappeared. Then Revata came in.

‘I will travel along with them, Gopa. They will cause disasters to the Punjab and my Lord.’

When Ashoka was informed of the plans of Devaka and his brahmacharin, he consulted Kala and Revata about what needed to be done. While they were thus engaged, Vimalamitra appeared and announced that a number of Brahmin priests from Pataliputra had arrived in the city and had called upon Devaka. He did not know what was discussed.

‘I can tell you, Lord,’ said Revata. ‘They will continue Devaka’s instigations, create suspicion about your work and if the people do not listen to them they will threaten them about the great disaster that will befall the Punjab which will be caused by Devaka himself. I wish to follow him and find out about the disaster.’

Ashoka thought for a moment and then said: ‘Listen, Vimalamitra, assign to each Brahmin a number of trusted men who will obstruct them the

moment they speak out against us and keep them day and night under control. We shall see how things develop.'

The Brahmins who were replacing Devaka began their work but everywhere along the way they ran into Taxilans who at first listened and then laughed and made light of them, praised Ashoka highly and caused street-rows against them everywhere, being unmoved by their holiness and curses. Vimalamitra warned the strangers to stop their religious tirades. But this only resulted in the instigators warning the godless people of the Punjab of the great disaster in store for them prepared by the enraged gods. Unrest grew. But it was clear that the Taxilans took Ashoka under their protection against the priests. Vimalamitra eventually had the instigators deported from the city to the land beyond the Sarasvati.

Finding his plans were being nipped in the bud, Devaka did not dare leave the city.



THE DANCE OF THE LEPER CHILDREN

The caravan leader, Nila, sank onto a bench, disheartened.

‘There’s nothing to be earned, Lambi, for the foreign traders avoid our rebellious city.’

‘But there is no rebellion.’

‘No one knows that in Bactria and Arichosa or in Iran and Syria. Even from Ujjain and Bharuchkacha there are hardly any merchants coming. They will not take the risk of losing their precious merchandise to the pillagers of Taxila.’

‘Everything will become normal when they hear that Ashoka is the viceroy of Taxila.’

‘Is the army commander, you mean! They revere him like a god; in the Shiva temple the Taxilans jostle each other to offer oblations, seeking boons. Vimalamitra says that the young Mauryan possesses the wisdom of a rishi. People throw themselves in the dust before him. Those that utter anything hostile about him are driven out of the city. Next week will bring the night of the new moon. There will be a great feast to honour the Prince. But I have no money; I have five daughters and no money, Lambi. Raumi and Tungi are as beautiful as Ushas but no man will come up to me and say: ‘Nila, here are gold, camels and black donkeys, now give me one of your

beautiful daughters.’ Yesterday I met Varisara, the goldsmith, who wanted to know how much dowry I would be settling on Tungi! These days they dare to ask such things! Dowry! Where am I going to get a dowry! How shall I pay for a wedding feast! ... I want to arrange their marriages at the market, Lambi. They are now fifteen and sixteen years old; are they to wither away at home doing work that is not there?’

‘You are the master of your daughters, Nila. Make sure they get husbands.’

‘Many warriors have come along with Prince Ashoka, Kshatriyas from Madhyadesa. They may make an offer to me of more gold for the girls than I would ever get here.’

A drummer and a flute player went through the city announcing the event, luring the people to the market. There, Nila stood with his daughters on a platform.

‘Who will bid gold for my girls who are more beautiful than the nymphs of Indra’s heaven and as obedient and as faithful as Savitri?’

Many soldiers from Ashoka’s army had strolled up to witness this strange spectacle. Hearing the announcement made by the drummer, even the commander himself wanted to see this unusual matrimonial arrangement. Disguised by Revata to look like a senior palace minister, Prince Ashoka stood together with Vimalamitra amongst the Taxilans. Revata pointed out Shakuni to him, who was in the midst of the onlookers.

When no offer of gold was made, Nila bared the shoulders and the shapely backs of the girls.

‘Beautiful! As though Kama had created them for himself. Who offers gold?’

When still no one made a bid he bared the breasts of both the girls. Shakuni—susceptible to every desirable woman and thinking that he could buy one of the girls—began to bid although he knew he would not take the girl to Pataliputra. Devaka would never allow it. Sela and Sissu, however, bid more. Shakuni outbid them. Then, a Taxilan called out: ‘Nila, don’t give your daughter to that fellow. He is the foot-washer of Devaka, the Brahmin from Pataliputra who curses you and your daughters!’

An angry Shakuni doubled his offer; still Nila refused, saying: ‘No, young man, he who serves Devaka is against Ashoka and can buy no daughter from me.’ There was loud approval of what Nila said. The crowd

of onlookers laughed at Shakuni who was left with no choice but slink away. Ashoka then sent Revata to the camel-driver to purchase the girls for Gopa who lived in Susmila's house. If Sela and Sissu wanted to marry them, that could still happen.

Thus, it was in this way that Raumi and Tungi came to live in Gopa's house.

The seeds of the feast had already taken root in the hearts of the Taxilans. They felt relieved of the burden of their revolt. Every measure taken by the Prince had brought them closer to him. Nonetheless, they did not dare to voice their happiness yet but Vimalamitra knew that their feelings needed an expression. He turned to Ashoka.

'Lord, the new moon festival in the month of Chaitra approaches soon. Do you want the Taxilans to celebrate it? '

'Do the people want to celebrate, Vimalamitra?'

'Sire, the festival will raise the happiness of the people as high as the Hymavant, because you rule Taxila.'

'Are the people in festive spirits, honourable minister?'

'Sire, see for yourself. Trust us.'

Ashoka gave his permission while at the same time taking precautions to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

War horns were blown, flutes played and drums beaten, announcing the beginning of the festivities. The Taxilans had already begun decorating their city as soon as Ushas sent her first red misty rays. When Ashoka, seated in the imperial howdah on the broad back of the royal elephant, Dadaka, rode out to watch the festival— followed by Kala, Vimalamitra, and other ministers all riding on richly caparisoned elephants—Taxila looked like a veritable garden of Eden. Garlands made of large, clear blue lianas were hung along the streets while fragile rare orchids hung from masts greeting the Prince. Boys and girls dressed in red and white, themselves looking like bright flowers, threw freshly picked flowers along the path of the Prince's cavalcade. Wherever Ashoka turned, happy laughter greeted him. Jugglers, jesters, snake charmers, musicians—each stopped midway because the crowd hastened to hail the Maharajah's son: 'Raja Ashoka!' ... 'Raja Ashoka!' ... 'Hail Shiva!'

‘Do you hear, Shakuni? ‘Raja’! We ought to be astonished that they do not cry out, ‘Maharajah!’” hissed Devaka.

‘If only they did, Lord! That would most certainly alarm Bindusara!’

Devaka nodded. ‘Well put, young Brahmin. But maybe, something else would alarm the whole of Aryavarta, something that would cast him out. Come along, I have an idea.’

Leaving the festivities behind, the two left the city and took the road leading to the leper colony.

When they entered the enclosure, Shakuni paled and stopped short, horrified by what his eyes beheld: He saw a man whose nose, ears and one eye, in addition to an arm up to the elbow, had been eaten away by the disease; the rest of his body was also badly ravaged.

‘Come along. Do not be alarmed by what the wretch has brought upon himself by his sinful deeds in a previous life,’ said an irritated Devaka.

‘Is every misfortune then due to sin from a previous life? And does every sin carry seeds of misery in successive incarnations?’ asked a frightened Shakuni.

‘Every transgression against the religious canons finds its rightful punishment,’ lashed out Devaka. Shakuni cringed at the very idea.

The leper had understood Devaka’s words. A screeching whistle suddenly resonated and from all sides, creatures—all of them horribly maimed—crawled and limped towards them. The man who had met them at the entrance now whispered something to the other lepers.

‘Priest! Priest!’ Devaka looked around him in alarm. Shakuni, legs trembling, quickened his steps. The doomed ones followed them menacingly.

‘What then was your sin, you, crippled priest with a stiff arm?’ mocked one of the lepers disabled and legless who dragged himself along with crutches.

As Devaka caught up with Shakuni, cynical laughter followed them.

‘Leave the miserable to their misery!’

The leper colony master drove back the wretched group and received the two priests. While Devaka explained the purpose of his visit, Shakuni glanced outside the room and saw a sweet-looking young girl dancing to a

pleasant yet melancholic melody being played on a flute by a young boy. Her dance was so perfect and expressive that Shakuni was transfixed.

‘Sir!’ Devaka approached and keenly observed the scene for a long time: two young people amongst all these mutilated creatures ... His hate had found a way out.

‘Are these children also lepers, master?’

The master nodded. Devaka’s gold was enough for the master to break the colony’s strict rules and convince the leader of the entertainment troupe which was to perform that evening at the city’s park, to include both the children in the evening’s performance. He bought makeup and ordered the children to mask the disfigured areas of their skin so that nobody would notice.

‘Will this be good enough, Sir?’ asked the young boy, as he approached both Brahmins.

‘Stay back, foul sinners!’ snapped Devaka. ‘If you even touch one of us, your life will be in danger.’ The children, visibly upset, retreated. ‘Tonight, when Prince Ashoka or Prince Kala calls you to them, then you may approach and touch them.’

‘Our master has strictly forbidden us to do that.’

‘The master does not count there.’

‘And will the Princes not curse us?’

‘If you dance beautifully and play your roles well, they will caress you, maybe even give you a kiss. Then kiss their hands and touch their feet when you bow to them. And if you kiss them your reward will be great.’

‘What?’ asked Vjadi. ‘Sugar? And honey cakes?’

‘And the most beautiful jewelry you wish.’

In her excitement, Vjadi moved towards Devaka to thank him for his kindness.

‘Stay where you are! You, impure and sinful creature! If you touch me or my friend I will hit you with my stick and you will not get any reward.’

Vjadi cringed timidly. She recalled the time when, before being stricken by the disease, she used to be caressed whenever she laughed. Since she had become a leper she was either snapped at or cursed. She hid behind her friend. She hated these two men like everyone who had cast her aside: her parents, her friends, and even Prince Ashoka and Prince Kala whom she had not yet even met.

Ashoka realised that riding atop his elephant would not allow him the chance to know the city well. After speaking to Revata, they went—disguised—to tour the city. They watched cockfights, goat-, ram- and dog-fights, and were astounded by the wild excitement to which the revelling crowd was led by the roused fury of the animals, and by their happy cries, when one animal wounded another, so it bled or was killed. When one dog jumped at the throat of another and clamped its jaws and the other yelped, trying to free itself from his blood-thirsty enemy to no avail, the onlookers had worked themselves up to a frenzy of laughter, spurring on the combatants. Ashoka took a step forward, but Revata held him back.

‘You merely wanted to know, not intervene, Sire,’ he whispered.

Ashoka turned away, angered.

Magicians, acrobats, and fortune-tellers attracted large groups of onlookers. Revata led the Prince to the temple, where terrified young goats were being sacrificed to giant snakes.

Inebriating liquor was being served, as it was done in Pataliputra on popular festival days. Ashoka withdrew within himself and returned disappointed to the palace. In the afternoon, a performance was given in his honour at the Bactrian amphitheatre: music, song, dance, a fight between four dogs and a hungry lion. The lion, a beautiful young fiery animal, savagely paced the arena, its muscled body tense, eyes glittering, raising its heavy maned head every now and then while its twitching tail flicked this way and that against its flanks. Occasionally it would roar, beginning as a growl from deep within its throat then swelling into a mighty bellow that would both quell and thrill the excited crowds into silence. The lion paced, seemingly controlling the entire amphitheatre with its majestic presence.

‘This is the most beautiful animal I ever saw, my Kullika! Where do all these beautiful forms come from?’

‘Lord, would it be enough if I quote from the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad? The Atman was originally neither male nor female, man nor woman, but the undivided unity of both. That oneness divided itself: the man became the creating will, the woman the form. In procreation they reunited. Then, the woman fled and hid herself in the many forms of animals: cow, horse, donkey, goat, sheep, elephant, lion, down to the ants. But the willing Atman followed her through all forms and so they brought forth the first ones of every kind of animal. Thus, in all that lives is the embodiment of the Atman.’

Ashoka had barely time to ponder what Kullika had just said when, suddenly, four dogs were let loose into the arena. The lion crouched, ready to leap. The dogs charged furiously at the lion. When the lion swatted at one of them with its enormous paws and opened its mouth for the fatal bite, the other dogs backed off and instantly charged again, wounding the lion. The lion was forced to face another of its attackers with an identical result. Grabbing one dog and slamming it to the ground the others would snap and hamper him. The dogs were unrelenting in their attacks. The savagery of the animals, their all-piercing growls, roars and yelps of pain, filled the arena.

The Prince sat up straight. His gaze travelled from the attackers to the excited spectators. Where was the bloodlust ... here or there? Where the wildness? Where the cause ... blame? Whose eyes were those that widened most, those of the men who incited the beasts or those of the animals that raged senselessly? What was the very purpose of this fight? Sheer enjoyment, lust ... but lust for what? The fight went on. None of the animals would tear itself loose from the enemy as each wanted the death of its opponent. Why all this needless savagery?

The lion began to show signs of exhaustion; blood flowed from its many wounds. The dogs pressed forward their attack, certain of victory. Ashoka raised a hand briefly as if to halt the proceedings.

‘Sire, they will see this as weakness! Take it in but do not interfere,’ whispered Kullika and Revata raised the imperial umbrella protectively over his master.

Ashoka let his hand drop slowly. Only the two of them knew what was going on inside the mind of the ruler of Taxila.

Hamstrung, the hindquarters of the lion gave in, his paws slashed but weakly at his attackers until exhaustion overcame him and the dogs moved in for the kill. The crowd screamed, jumping up and down in savage ecstasy.

‘They have the blood of tigers in their veins, Sire,’ remarked one of the ministers, referring to the exulting crowd.

The Prince stood up and left even as excited crowd cried out: ‘Raja Ashoka! Hail Shiva!’

‘I hear that you have watched our people as a father does his children, Sire. May I ask your impression of our city and inhabitants?’ asked the

most senior minister when they had returned to the palace.

‘Your people are as rough as those of the East, Vimalamitra.’

‘Perhaps worse?’

‘No. But what will soften them—here, there—it cannot be the priests of the East nor can it be the freedom of the West. Which of the gods protect the people, the animals, against that cruel selfishness, Vimalamitra? Something is lacking in mankind ...’

‘Sire, tonight I will bring the wisest people of Taxila to your palace.’

Ashoka experienced time and again with increasing surprise the differences in the way of life and views on society and religion between the East and the West. There, hemmed in by the Brahmanical hegemony; while here, an openness, with movements flowing without hindrance. But then the first and foremost weakling would inevitably bring forth a shift... Sumana. The great empire of Chandragupta and Bindusara would crumble and fall apart. Could he let that happen? But how could he be assured of unification if he attained power? Suppression of the people’s free will here? Or, of the priesthood there? Force upon people what he thought to be right? Or, the servility of Madhyadesa in the West? One was just as foolish as the other! What then? What then?

The ministers of Taxila had invited the most important people in the city to attend the festivities at Ashoka’s palace. Rich merchants, scholars, government employees, and respected priests all went to the home of the army commander. Vimalamitra had employed a large number of men to provide lighting for the park with torches, lamps, and beautiful firework. Gopa, Raumi and Tungi, along with other young girls, went about offering refreshments to the guests while Prince Kala supervised the guards who had been posted all around the park. The grassy area near the lotus pond with its reddish pink lotuses was to be the stage on which Sivadhatta’s players would perform. The pond had been partly covered in the morning with a dance floor just below the surface which was invisible to the onlookers.

As Ashoka was returning from the tour of the illuminated city, he was greeted even more vociferously by cries of, ‘Hail Raja Ashoka!’ and ‘Hail Shiva!’

Ashoka reflected on the mindless savagery he had seen earlier that day. What was it that was lacking in these people? But the sight of all these happy young people, the bright colours and the cheerful festive mood,

moved him. Many highly placed Taxilans visited the Prince in his tent. A number of sages and scholars accompanied Vimalamitra, among them the Vedic scholar, Vasudeva; the yogi, Bhava; Salya, who belonged to the school of Saankhyan philosophy, the Buddhist scholar, Mati, and the philosopher Purna, the materialist.

‘The wisdom of these men flows out from Taxila and envelopes the entire Indian country, O, Prince.’

‘Wisdom has only value if it enhances the happiness of living and feeling beings. Who amongst you, honourable scholars, has acquired so much wisdom that he can free us from the confusing chaos of the cruelty of men, the selfishness of priests, the hate between peoples, the lack of protection of animals, the misery of the Chandalas, intolerance towards other creeds? What is it that India lacks?’

The scholars were greatly impressed by the straightforward manner in which Ashoka posed his challenging question, in the process, circumventing speculative philosophies.

The sound of the heavy dole was heard and Sivadhatta’s players appeared on stage, respectfully prostrating in the direction of the army commander. Crowds converged from all sides placing themselves, some on the grassy field, and waited. The strings of the veena being plucked hummed in the air, dulcet tones wafted over the park. Sivadhatta knew from years of experience how to give a beautiful performance. He had trained his players himself. Often, he devised his own plays. So, he had skilfully enlisted Vjadi as a dancer and Vadha as a musician into his troupe and this had helped him reap a rich reward from the strange priest. Just on the other side of Ashoka’s seat which was decorated with colourful flowers he had constructed a cave, the entrance of which went under the pond and led to the kingdom of the Nagas, deep under the city of Taxila. Meanwhile, as preparations were going on, the female slaves sprayed rose water from Iran and sprinkled sandalwood powder from Bharuch.

A priest appeared on stage. All kneeled to receive his blessings.

‘May the blessings of Shiva, the creator of life, who holds the world together with his dance of life and fills the space with his movement reside in you and may Kama Ananga¹ chase away the ones who would disturb Shiva Shambhu in his blissful meditations; may Ganesha brighten your mind and Kumara mount his peacock that spreads the protective fan of its

tail over Bindusara's empire. May all happiness from Shiva be bestowed upon you ...'

Sivadhatta appeared:

'Enough! Hello, Marisha!'

'Here I am, Sir.'

'I suggest that you perform a *nataka*² that will fascinate the high rulers of Taxila.'

'But a *nataka* should deal with a serious subject, Sivadhatta, and Taxila is in a joyous haze. Where would you find the right players to perform a drama when the people would rather watch a comic satire—since all of us are in a festive mood—in this happy city to which a young Raja had offered his wisdom.'

'But all will long to hear of Vjadi's terrible fate and the players are dying to show their art to the Prince from the Mauryan dynasty whose fame shall rule for centuries to come.'

Listen. Do you not hear that melancholic lamenting? We are here in the park of Pasenadi, King of Kosala, and that is the lamentation of his Rani, Padmavathi. She is a devi for the poor and now sends forth her lamentations to the gods.'

'How can a Rani who has acquired so much karma express dissatisfaction, Sir! For the highest bliss awaits her after this life.'

'Hush! You do not know the tragic story of Padmavathi and Pasenadi!'

In his previous life, Pasenadi once went hunting and killed a deer that happened to be the reincarnation of a rishi. The dying rishi cursed Pasenadi. Meanwhile, Padmavathi—as the housewife of the hermit— inadvertently placed a heavy jug on the head of a snake and thereby killing it. The dying snake also cursed Padmavathi, disclosing to her that she was actually the daughter of the King of the Nagas, whose city lay deep under Taxila. Both were thus cursed. From then on, Pasenadi went on to live as an ascetic, accumulating karma that would reach the skies. Padmavathi did the same, by offering her life to the recluse so that they were reborn under more fortunate circumstances. Pasenadi ascended the throne as King and Padmavathi became his wife. But they had no children; it was to be the punishment accorded by the gods.

Their life was so holy, the blessings for the people so great, their offerings so abundant, that the gods remained continuously pleased. The god Varuna felt moved, and though denying them a son, blessed them with a daughter. However, the King of the Nagas demanded that when the girl would turn twelve years, she should be given to him as a sacrifice for the loss of his own daughter. The gods were angry, but the Naga-Raja was unmoved.

Now Vjadi is almost twelve. You shall play the role of Pasenadi's first minister and friend.'

'Anything else, Lord?'

'I hope everyone will listen with interest and watch the play that I, Sivadhata, devised especially for this feast and I hope I may earn the respect of the honourable Prince and all the dignitaries that have assembled here in the park of the gracious Maurya.'

At first, Ashoka had listened with interest but the impressions of the day did not leave his mind and he turned once again to the wise men.

'Well, Vasudeva, what is it, in your opinion, that India lacks?'

'Lord, the four Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Laws of Manu, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the revealed wisdom of the gods. The rishis were the vehicles for these revelations, so that the citizens of India would abide in their wisdom. The priests are to learn the Vedas and perform the sacrifices, the Kshatriyas protect the priests, the Vaishyas work and make offerings, and the Shudras serve the other castes. Each Aryan shall undergo four stages of life: brahmacharin, householder, forest hermit, and sannyasin. If he is led on an inward spiritual path by Vedanta towards the world-soul, the universal spirit, if he has encountered the awesomeness of that Brahman, the Atman, and has turned his back on all earthly maya, then his journey is complete. When every desire has left, his self dissolves into the All, like the river is lost in the ocean, name and form laid aside, he is released. *Tat Tvam Asi*, says the Chandogya Upanishad.'

'And the *Mleccha* and the *Chandala*, Vasudeva, who are as much a part of the Atman as you are?'

'They are impure, Lord, but if they do what is appropriate to their varna, they can, through rebirth after rebirth, enter into one of the higher varnas.'

'And the Punjab, and people who live outside Aryavarta?'

'They have no faith in the revealed Vedas, Lord.'

‘Well, Purna ...’

‘Lord, the materialists believe that the soul is part of the body, born along with the body and dies when the body dies, without remnant ... without after-life. The being, comprised of knowledge, has sprouted out of the elements: earth, water, fire, and air, and will dissolve into them again. There is neither heaven nor release, nor soul in another world. Sacrifices to the forefathers and the gods are nothing but a source of munificence for the priests who misuse the Vedas, which are put together by the Brahmins for their profit. No, Lord, the useful and the pleasant are the main aims of man, that which make their life bearable. What India lacks is knowledge and insight to understand what all that surrounds it truly is.’

Sivadatta: ‘In the park of Pasenadi’s palace. The First Act.’

Pasenadi is seen sitting in deep meditation. Padmavathi brings one precious offering after another. She complains that she cannot do without Vjadi. She offers her own life to the king of the Nagas yet no sign emerges. Then Vjadi appears, as beautiful as Ushas, the blushing dawn, lissome as Gauri, Shiva’s wife, blossoming as the newly flowering Ashoka tree. Padmavathi hides her own pain and puts heart into Vjadi for life. The girl’s laughter is sympathetic, full and gay, so much so that Kama, the god of love, shoots one of his arrows at her. Prince Vadha, who was playing the flute, approaches her, obviously enchanted.

‘Play, Prince Vadha, play.’

And with his music Vjadi brings to life the dances of the celestial gods so enchantingly that the gods themselves come down to see her dance.

Then, Padmavathi prays to Varuna, pleading for Vjadi’s life, for it is the dance itself, inspiring and energising, that is Vjadi’s great offering. But Varuna remains deaf to her pleas for the gods themselves have determined her fate. Two Apsaras come down from Indra’s heavenly abode, moved by Vjadi’s fate and decide to stay on earth to help Vjadi.

Still watching the dance, Ashoka turned to the Buddhist scholar, Mati.

‘Are not Purna’s teachings also the basis of Buddhism, honoured Mati?’

‘No, Lord. Then every expression of joy at the cost of another, every profit from another’s loss, would be excused. Every lofty endeavour to reach God would be useless; all offering to our ancestors, to our fellow

creatures, would be valueless. And the Buddha preached compassion towards every living and feeling being,' opined Mati.

The second Act of the nataka began.

Sivadatta: 'In Pasenadi's palace. The Second Act.'

Pasenadi is seated on the throne with Padmavathi beside him while the ministers have taken their places around them. Vadha praises Vjadi and seeks her hand in marriage. But the king does not consent nor daring to disclose the reason for his refusal. Vadha threatens to kill himself. In moving and beautiful slokas, Vadha explains that he cannot live without Vjadi. Padmavathi understands his pain and then discloses the reason to him: Vjadi is soon to be sacrificed to the King of the Nagas.

Vadha weeps. He looks for Vjadi and proclaims to her his love and Vjadi accepts him in love. Vadha then urges her to flee with him, disclosing that they have to sacrifice her to the King of the Nagas. They depart secretly, accompanied by the two apsaras from Indra's heaven.

'Purna's teachings of the materialists' philosophy could bring about pleasure to Aryavarta but not real happiness. There is no dearth of pleasure here. What does Salya think? What do the *Saankhya* canons say?'

'Lord, the Saankhya accepts neither the Vedas as revelations of the gods, nor the doctrine of oneness of Vedanta's Atman, nor the sole existence of matter by the materialists. Animal sacrifices are impure, other kinds of offerings do not prevent rebirth: that would make it easier for the rich to be liberated than for the poor. The Saankhya does not admit of this inequality and injustice. The soul has to be recognised as being different from bodily life, then it will not return. Souls originate at the time of creation in unison with Nature. The gross body springs forth anew with every birth. Once the soul with its knowledge has seen through Nature, then the link is broken. The body dies and so does the *linga sharira*, the primordial body, which is the cause of reincarnation. No Brahmin, no gods, and no revelation of the Vedas: they obstruct the liberating awareness, Lord. Human wisdom and knowledge is what the citizens of India lack, both Aryan and Chandala.'

‘You regard deliverance by means of wealth as unjust and unfair, honoured Salya. But is not deliverance only for the people gifted with wisdom and knowledge, equally unfair and unreasonable? Does a man have wealth only through his own self? No, he inherits wealth or he acquires it! Does man have wisdom only through his own self? No, he is gifted it at his birth or he acquires it.’

Sivadhatta: ‘In the jungle of Jambudvipa. The Third Act.’

Vadha and Vjadi trek through the woods. Vjadi is exhausted but Vadha plays his flute and the melody infuses her with new strength; she begins to dance ... The nymphs join her in this offering to the gods. They lead her to the hermitage of Samathu near the sacred Ganga. Samathu is deep in meditation. Reverently, silently, they wait for a long time until he awakens. Samathu is moved by their pious attitude and asks who they are. After listening to Vadha, narrating Vjadi’s story, Samathu however, tells them that their plight is hopeless. When Vjadi turns twelve years of age, the nagas in the jungle will hunt her down and take her back to their king. The nymphs cry, upset; they want to protect Vjadi. Samathu explains to them that what the gods have willed cannot be retracted. Vadha begs Samathu for help. Samathu then meditates. Coming out of his meditation he suggests that the cosmic dance of Shiva that holds together Creation can help her. First they must sacrifice a black he-goat. So the animal is brought. The priest will extinguish the life of the animal ...

Ashoka, however, does not want any animal sacrifices and forbids the offering; he does not want any more animals killed today.

Vjadi is inconsolable; she sinks to the ground. The judgement has been passed. She will have to go down into the kingdom of the Nagas which lies in the dark depths of the lotus pond deep under Taxila where the snakes reign. But Samathu thinks that Shiva will come to her succour even without sacrificing an animal. He orders them to gather flowers instead, and then teaches them to dance the *tandava nritya*, the dance of Shiva.

‘And you, Bhava?’

‘Lord, let each avert his senses from the outside world and turn his mind inwards. Let him learn how to meditate and acquire the secret power to free his soul from its earthly ties because that is the purpose of all yoga practice. The awareness of people lacks depth; hence their souls have not been released.’

Ashoka listened no longer.

‘And you, Mati?’

‘Lord, Buddha too yearned for liberation; Nirvana is the paramount goal. To that liberation one must journey along a long path, an eightfold one. Buddha took birth more than a thousand times before he became enlightened. Will our road be shorter? Enlightenment does not come without awareness, nor awareness without meditation. But even before one begins meditation, one must develop the right attitude to life. He who will be blessed with the joy that sprouts from the right endeavour acquires inner peace—the feeling of bliss—that leads to deeper insight and knowledge.

And how does man come to the right attitude in thoughts, words, and deeds, that makes meditation beneficial and fruitful, Lord? Primarily the Tathagata, the enlightened Buddha, appeals for change of the inner, a total change of view and attitude from the collective thinking, feeling, and desiring: the true faith. Like the sky that glows first red before dawn, so must—to everything that the disciple of Buddha wants to achieve—come first the right attitude. That is the first glimmering of light, the first step, which converts the pupil into an upasaka, a devotee, without him becoming a disciple yet; that is the sacred ground on which the building rises. The further steps on the path may be even journeyed in coming lives. Through the right attitude and trust he has prepared himself for the path that leads towards Nirvana. It is the true test of endurance, the gateway that leads towards the path of awakening. Those who wish to proceed further can take this path. Only then will *sila*, the right way-of-life, follow.

And of what does the right way-of-life consist, Sire, of which each person may partake, upasaka and disciple, Brahmin and Chandala, man and woman alike? In the five precepts:

Compassion: Expressed by not harming any living being and which should come from within; compassion as much for the animal kingdom as for one’s fellow-men;

Not taking what is not given freely: thus not yearning for another man's belongings;

Chastity: Eschewing adultery and indecency for the upasaka, complete celibacy for the disciple; and purity of the body, words and thought;

Truth: He who is not pure in intention in his pursuit of truth, cannot be—according to the Enlightened One—an *upasaka* or disciple of the path: truth, and loving kindness, which is one with truth; and,

To abstain from inebriating liquor: For the reason that it disturbs the one-pointedness of the mind.

Outward appearances had no value for the Tathagata, the Enlightened One. What is of value for him is: pursuit of moral perfection, a loving heart, which triumphs over all animosity and hatred; that leads one onto the right path.

And why must the seeker choose this sincere way of life, Lord? Not only because it is required for his own progress towards enlightenment but also because it serves the happiness of the entire world and all its creatures. That is why the Buddha preached at marketplaces and in the parks, where each one was gladly received, the king, the Brahmin and the Chandala, and he preached not in the language of the erudite priests but in the language of the people, and for all the people. This attitude to life is lacking in the people of Aryavarta, Lord.'

Ashoka had listened with growing interest. He could hardly keep his attention on the next act of the play, which soon followed.

Sivadhatta: 'Pasenadi's palace. The Fourth Act.'

Sadness has enveloped the palace. Vjadi has disappeared with Vadha. The nagas in the jungle will seek her out. The king is desperate. The queen is beside herself with grief. Pasenadi consults a sage. He says that they must go to Taxila, to the new-moon festival, and perform a sacrifice to Shiva. Shiva is the god of death, but also of life. There the first minister must negotiate with the Naga-Raja. Then appear five beautiful girls from Kosala; they dance like Apsaras, and in their dance offer themselves as sacrifices to the king of the Nagas, so that Vjadi may stay alive and Pasenadi's lineage may not die. New hope springs in Pasenadi's court. Pasenadi and Padmavathi thank them and prepare to leave with them for Taxila.

‘Well, Vasudeva? You are the greatest scholar in Taxila.’

‘Buddhism may not be right for India, Sire. Self-interest, one’s own welfare, one’s own salvation is always held up as the highest principle. Could one ask of your people to give up that self-interest? Who could impel them?’

‘Those who are not touched by spiritual selfishness, who are not allowed to study what you call the sacred Vedas! From the thinkers the ideas, from the downtrodden the power will sprout for this inconceivable work.’

‘Buddhism will pine away, just as the beauty of a glorious flower does in the darkness of the endless jungle. Beauty that reaches no human eye. And truth! Just like the fragile petals of a flower which scatter in the thorny bushes, so will Buddha’s thoughts spread through the envious sects where they will be torn apart, desecrated. He who wants the truth will seek the truth, but will find many truths. The only truth is the revealed truth of the Vedas, and they are as fixed and unchangeable as the heavenly dome over Jambudvipa.’

‘The Tathagata only acknowledges as truth that which ripens in sensible awareness resting on the solid rock of knowledge and thus growing along with knowledge,’ suggested Mati.

‘Buddhism causes fissures. The Vedas unite Aryavarta. That faith in the unifying nature of the Vedas is what Aryavarta is lacking.’

Sivadhatta: ‘The lotus pond in Taxila. Fifth Act:’

Vadha and Vjadi approach. They appear as pilgrims, tired after having traversed the long way from the holy Ganga. The Prince seeks out the King of the Nagas. A messenger emerges out of the water near the cave and asks what it is the Prince wishes. Vadha says that he wishes to speak to the King of the Nagas, to ask him to give Vjadi to him. The messenger then takes Vadha along with him through the subterranean passage in the lotus pond to the kingdom of the Nagas. On the surface an anxiously waiting Vjadi, expresses in her sinuous dance her sorrow and desperation. It is only her love that gives her the strength to perform this offering to the gods. Then Pasenadi’s court arrives, grieving. Vjadi hides herself and overhears the sobbing lamentations of the Raja and Rani. She, too, weeps. The veena is muffled, the drums muted, the dance tremulous. Pasenadi

and Padmavathi pray to Shiva but there is no sign yet. The five girls from Kosala are ready to be offered to the Naga King. Still no sign comes. Meanwhile, on Vjadi's behalf, Pasenadi's minister tries to intercede with the Naga King. The two apsaras, who accompanied the royal children, in a moving dance plead for Shiva's intercession to save Vjadi. Their eyes are centred on Ashoka but the Mauryan does not want to be taken for Shiva and remains silent. Suddenly Pasenadi's minister, together with Vadha, is back from his tryst with the Naga king ... Vjadi's life will be spared only if Shiva gives a sign that he agrees. At this announcement, Pasenadi, Padmavathi, the minister and the nymphs now dance even more intensely before Shiva-Ashoka. No sign appears.

Vadha then takes up his flute and begins to play with all his heart, expressing his deep longing and love for the unhappy Princess. Vjadi appears and dances; she performs the *tandava nritya*, the Dance of Shiva that holds together creation taught to her by the Sage Samathu. The veena weeps and the sarangi sings in heavenly sounds its urgent pleading while the drums softly provide the rhythms to this cosmic dance. Vjadi's performance turns into a heavenly exaltation. She entrances all while she keeps her eyes directed on Shiva-Ashoka. Pasenadi, Padmavathi, the girls from Ayodhya, the nymphs, the minister—all stretch out their hands to him whom they behold as Shiva.

The music becomes even more alluring, the dance more profound. All eyes turn to the young Maurya. Still no sign. Then it seems as if all power drains from them. The veena and the sarangi are still heard but this time more muted. The slender girl approaches the pond, which waters are dark and smooth. Only the tragic sacrifice to the Naga King remains. Once more Vadha begins to play and Vjadi continues to dance the tandava. Anxiously everyone looks on; many weep. Suddenly, the frightful head of the Naga King rises out of the pond, calling out: 'Vjadi, Vjadi!' She turns to the terrible monster and dances with slow steps to the bank. She crosses the bank ... but does not sink! It is the sign of Shiva! She appears to float over the waves! Her anklets, softly tinkling with her graceful movements, touch the water lightly. Like an ethereal creature she floats, dancing forth to Shiva. Joy breaks out, the veena is triumphant, the flutes

sing, the conches blare, the gong bangs. And all sink kneeling before Shiva who, moved by Vjadi's profound dance, has freed her of the curse. The illusion is perfect. Many onlookers sink down in awe and bow their heads to the ground.

Pasenadi:

'Who will not honour the one who saved Vjadi,
It is he, who quenches the thirst of our lands with rains,
Through storms gives us health and strength,
Restores honesty and truth,
Heals animosity, drives away revolt,
Unites the people
In friendship and joy;
May fortune and prosperity thus increase!
Shiva, moved by Vjadi's dance, saved her with a miracle,
Of an untimely death by sacrifice.'

The king and queen express their gratitude to Shiva. But Vjadi approaches him, in who all see Shiva. Her lovely, frail figure bends in childlike innocence over to him, her hands reach out, her fingers and arms stretch in one harmonious movement, towards him, her saviour. All eyes are upon the girl, encouraging and friendly.

She is warned not to come near Ashoka, but Vjadi feels she has found love again after a long time of rejection. She longed to be fondled ... and she moves on. They want to stop her but the few who attempt to do so do not dare to touch her. Suddenly, Revata's voice is heard: 'Leper!'

All those who have come close to Vjadi now hurriedly retreat. The girl, happily laughing, moves towards the army commander who has saved her from death ... so she feels, caught up in her play. Revata warns Sagka. A chakra whizzes. Vjadi falls down, dead.

There is a horrified silence. With glazed eyes and vacant looks people watch. Two doctors come forward on Ashoka's orders. Then, a deadly silence.

'Leprosy, Sire!'

'Bring Vadha and Sivadhatta here!'

‘Vadha too is a leper, Sire.’

‘Who brought you here, Vadha?’

‘Two men brought us with them from the leper camp, O, Prince.’

‘Who?’

‘I do not know, Lord.’

‘Why?’

‘Vjadi was promised a big reward if she touched or even kissed Prince Ashoka and Prince Kala.’

‘How did they join your troupe, Sivadhatta?’

‘A strange priest offered me three measures of gold if I would let them act in my troupe. Vjadi was a gifted dancer, they told me.’

‘Did you know they were lepers?’

‘No, Sire.’

‘Tomorrow you will take the camp master prisoner, Sagka.’

‘Priest Devaka and his pupil,’ the whisper rippled through the crowd, becoming louder and louder, ending in cries of: ‘Kill the murderers! Now!’

Vjadi’s body was removed immediately and burned, Vadha taken back to the camp.

Ashoka ordered the festivities to continue with the fireworks, dances, and play. Refreshments were served. But now a black shadow hung over those present because of the criminal plot and the tragic way in which Vjadi’s frail life had ended. Yet, it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted when it was learned that a stranger and not a Taxilan was to blame for this foul plan.



CATASTROPHE AWAITS

Ashoka ... Sleep eluded him. Vjadi ... Once again, a frail and hapless victim of Devaka's hate. Her entreating smile still vivid before Ashoka's eyes, it made him feel utterly powerless. Could the East and the West ever be unified?

‘As long as there are people who seek the gods with greedy hearts, there will be priests with greedy hearts ready to receive them.’ The more he delved into and searched within Brahmanism, the more clear it became to him that the shortcomings were to be found in the cravings of men, among them the desire for wealth and power. And what about himself? And Prince Sumana, who wanted to accumulate wealth to gratify every sensual desire, a king who wanted wealth for his personal desires? And then there is a priesthood which makes people eager to offer sacrifices and proffer fees and hospitality to the priests! Do the Shudras and Vaishyas exist in this world only to fill the fat bellies of the priests and Rajas or to hand them over their most beautiful women to slake their lusts? When the Brahmin is born, is he not naked and helpless, as the Shudra is? When the Brahmin dies, is his impure body not despised, as the Shudra's is? Then why is the short period of time between those two eternities so different? Is it impossible to convince the Indians of the flagrant injustice which, over centuries of tradition, everyone has been made to believe as natural and just! Neither

Bindusara nor Sumana would attempt to alleviate the burdens and eliminate the fears of the common people. The Shakyamuni renounced his throne, donned the yellow robe of the mendicant monk, and became the Buddha. Now, the radiance of his spirit has faded away in numerous dying rays, like an unseen beautiful flower in the recesses of the jungle. Why did he abandon the power that he could have used to battle disease, famine, natural disasters, fear of life. Why not protect his subjects against those who lived off them instead of preaching the path of liberation from all misery, the happiness of all living creatures, compassion, sincerity, purity in word and deed, selflessness ... Is it not true that all this preaching has come to no avail against the tremendous power of the Brahmin sacrificial priests which pervades all life like salt does the waters of the oceans, making it undrinkable, or a suffocating smoke that fills the lovely forests? Faith and the right-way-of-life! Happiness for all beings! What an audacious thought, my Mati! That is what India lacks!

Devaka and Shakuni, along with Sokota, had fled the city. Revata hastened to follow them. Devaka's journey was that of a fanatic. Pious men overcome by the wild-fantastical legends and myths of a sensuous and easily excitable people made their way up the road that led to the never-ending high Himalayas, barren of life, to get closer to the abodes of the gods, to look in pure unabated worship upon a world that was in the greatest of contrast to the plains of the sacred Ganga. And Devaka? Up to Bukephala they followed the road used by Alexander the Macedonian. They then crossed rivers and mountain passes which led to the valley of Kashmir. Devaka set a hard pace, prompted by hatred and injured pride, relentless in the pursuit of his goal. Every pause was like an impediment to his lofty task: bringing down the wrath of the gods on a damned people on this side of the Sarasvati. This would be their first ordeal. He but barely took time to eat and strode restlessly on while the others still tarried.

‘Save your strength for what is still ahead,’ said Sokota and he waved his arm in the direction of the north where the mountain ranges rose higher and higher on the other side of Kashmir. The journey became difficult after Srinagar. They climbed first along vineyards then through forests of cedar and cypress. Sokota knew the route along the dangerous mountain paths that lay above deep caves, by foaming rivers and finally over bridges formed by ice, and hazardous roads.

Inside him, Devaka burned the unquenchable fire of implacable hate. He was the first to take the risk of any dangerous step, the first to cross in grim determination a difficult river, uttering prayers as he called upon the gods whom he hoped to please by his deeds. As Revata watched, he asked himself in amazement what could be driving the priest. He did not want to save people, but destroy them; not bring them happiness, but bring them ruin, suffering and fear! Why? During steep climbs he gasped for breath more than the younger ones; yet undaunted he hastened on. The others cheered when they descended into a valley where wild nature offered a temporary respite. Devaka merely plunged onwards. They came upon a tribe of Darus who mined the mountains for precious metals and panned rivers for gold and precious gems, besides cultivating vineyards making wine and weaving scarves out of goat hair. The Darus lived deep in the remote valleys of the mountains of the gods. Sokota led them along the difficult trade route which connected with the northern lands. After a tough, arduous journey they reached Iskardo on the Indus and now lay before them the Shygar Valley. Another few days of travel brought them to the mysterious lake that had been rising for many years. It lay behind a gigantic glacier that held back an enormous amount of melted snow and water. There it lay, of ominous proportions, against the high mountain walls, scarcely moving, rising ever so slowly as if aware of its power to destroy. For a long time Devaka walked around, went up and down, lips pursed, not uttering a word. But his mind worked feverishly: how to cause the glacier wall to break down and make a channel for the torrents that would gush through the Shygar and Indus to the accursed plains of the Punjab ...

Revata saw him standing atop the ice wall at night, his figure silhouetted against the clear light of the stars, an insignificant dot against the majestic landscape of ice and snow. The priest obviously believed that the well-being of the people and the land lay in his hands to either grant or withhold. Every other belief was sacrilegious. Not for a single moment was his soul elevated to greatness by the view of the mighty mountain range or the magnificence of nature. He and the priests held sway over everything, mightier than the gods themselves. The dam, the devastating flood, the accursed tribes ... it was all that filled his mind.

It was late when Devaka returned.

‘How can we break up the dam, Sokota?’

‘We, Lord? We are merely humans!’

‘Silence! I, Brahmin, will it to break up and its waters to punish the sinners.’

Sokota and Revata looked at each other.

‘And the thousands of people and animals who are innocent ... and the Maharajah ... when the harvest is destroyed!’

‘Can he who has called down misfortune upon himself, complain?’

Sokota did not reply. He had wanted to warn the people of the Punjab of the coming menace.

‘How deep can the mine workers dig into the earth?’

‘Lord, the earth goddess will ...’

‘Keep quiet. How deep?’

‘Discover for yourself, Lord.’

The next morning, Devaka rose early and went to the glacier dam.

‘A tiger, Revata, who attacks to kill,’ whispered Sokota.

‘Let us return to Taxila, Sokota, and warn the Prince.’

‘You are right. Let the priest spoil his karma. Do not say anything to him.’

Devaka decided to get mine workers from a nearby valley. Sokota led the small group back.

The chief of the tribe of Darus was not inclined to let his men do the work but Devaka threatened him with the wrath of the gods, death and destruction. The wicked Prince from Pataliputra would come and conquer the valleys; he knew no mercy, he would kill the tribes if the flood did not deluge the Punjab. The chief succumbed to Devaka’s threats and the following morning, a group of miners joined Devaka, but where the road turned off to Kashmir, both Revata and Sokota disappeared as fast as their mules could carry them, making haste to Ashoka. But all this did not worry Devaka. He knew the way now. The tribal chief had given him many sacks of food and wine for the workers although it slowed down the journey.

Sokota and Revata descended into the Hydaspes¹ Valley as quickly as the mules could take them and came upon Ashoka and his army in Kashmir. The Prince had marched victoriously through the upper Punjab: Udjana, Abhisara, Asvaka. The inhabitants had welcomed him joyously, coming from far and near bearing valuable gifts of gold gems and scarves made of the finest goat hair. Elsewhere, Sangala and his soldiers had brought under their control the remotest part of valley for their righteous Prince. Kashmir

was the last bastion. The many exploits of Ashoka, told and retold many times, had turned him into a demi-god in the eyes of the people. Ashoka lingered here longer, enthralled by the incomparable beauty of this mountainous land. For a long time he looked at the unreachable snow tops to one of which Manu had tied his ship after the floods ... Was there the land of the gods, Shiva's home? Shiva, who was Agni and Rudra ... At creation his third eye had burned away all that lived atop the Himalayas. Shiva, the god of power and life, Lord of the animals, the bearer of the steer banner. Sitting upon his throne in the high regions, pure and white, with Parvati, his mountain-born wife. Why here? Where life freezes, where no animal can live, where the flame out of the eye fades in the chill. Is this all deceit, a beautiful deceit? Shiva's home?

Revata's message prompted him to immediately return to Taxila.

Vimalamitra had joined the expedition. On Vimalamitra's advice, Ashoka sent ten heavily armed soldiers on mountain ponies, commanded by Sagaka with Sokota as guide to the Shygar Valley to capture the priest and his pupil.

Taxila was in a state of panic when Ashoka returned with his army. A sudden flooding of the Indus would cause tremendous damage and cost many lives! Messengers ran swiftly along the Indus plains, preceded by drumbeats and the sound of war-horns. The Prince's message was announced everywhere: 'Ashoka, the Maharajah's commander, informs the people along the holy Indus that the Dasyus will soon send a great flood to inundate the land. Store your harvests! Protect your lives and that of your herds.' The Prince set up a network of runners to carry messages to and fro. Everyone had heard of the exploits of this Prince and thus no one ignored his warning; was it not, after all, like a warning from Shiva himself? With nervous haste—it was a punishment of the Dashyues—they set about saving what they could.

The delegation of Antioch I Soter, which was to bring an answer to Virata's request for assistance in the battle against Pataliputra, arrived in Taxila and met the minister for foreign affairs. Alarmed, he sent for Vimalamitra. The senior-most minister considered the matter first and then informed Ashoka, who then decided to receive the secret mission meant for Virata. The westerners, having first bathed, were well taken care of. They were feasted

and then allowed by the Prince to come into the reception hall. Their servants bore gifts for the mutinous Taxilan.

‘Honoured Virata, we have been sent by Antioch Soter, the mighty King of Syria, Armenia, Medea, Babylonia, Mesopotamia, and many other kingdoms. You request for help of the great King in wresting the land that lies west of the Sarasvati and the desert from Bindusara’s empire. The great King would like to know how large a detachment of troops you expect from the Syrians. Furthermore, our mighty Lord would like to know what relations you hope to establish with the Syrian King. These gifts, we offer from our King: beautiful carpets from Persia, gems from Khorissan and from the mountains of Taft and Farsistan.’

The man whom they had taken to be Virata answered: ‘Honoured envoys of the Great Antioch Soter, the rebellion was suppressed by me. The Indian Emperor will never allow a part of his empire to be torn out. His army is well-trained and consists of nine thousand elephants, thousands of battle carts, thirty thousand horsemen and six hundred thousand foot-soldiers. Their commander is Prince Ashoka, the Wild Prince of Pataliputra, who is said to be invincible.’

The envoys were seriously alarmed. ‘Lord, your information is very different from that of your representatives at the Syrian court. They said that Bindusara was old and weak and his son Sumana, the Crown Prince, a poor commander of the army. May we ask what has prompted the noble Virata to dare a revolt against such a powerful king? The Emperor was said to be old and weak.’

‘In India, the ascension to the throne is decided by the Emperor himself and is as yet still unresolved. They say here that the mighty King of Syria has trouble taking back Pergamum and that Egypt is a dangerous neighbour to Syria; that Bactria and Arochosia as well as Gedrosia barely obey the King. Can the King then think of extending his empire into the Madhyadesa, where the Indian king is known as Amitraghata, ‘the conqueror of enemies’, and the wild Prince Ashoka is commander of an army much more powerful than that of the Syrians?’

The envoys rose as one:

‘The Virata who sent a delegation to our king is someone else, other than he who has received us today.’

‘The Virata who had sought your king’s help has been devoured by the vultures. You have been welcomed by Prince Ashoka of Pataliputra, who has recouped the Punjab back into the empire of Bindusara Amitraghata.’

The envoys fell to their knees and bowed their heads to the ground.

‘Sire, we seek your pardon and ask that we be allowed to return to Baghdad.’

‘You are my guests today. You can rest in Taxila as long as you choose and then you may return to your land. Wait only for a flood that is expected in the Indus region to pass. I want you to have everything you need.’

The envoys were lodged in Gopa’s house. On Ashoka’s orders they enjoyed magnificent care.

After his return to the Shygar Valley, Devaka immediately set the mineworkers to work to dig a tunnel under the glacier to the lake. Under his watchful eyes, the work proceeded quickly. After many days of toil, water was seen seeping into the cave. Devaka had to use the direst of threats—curses and fears of hell—to get the labourers to continue working. Many refused, aware that a crack in the dam would cost them their lives.

‘If the Wild Prince comes to your valley, not only your lives but those of your wives and children too will be at stake.’ Yet, they still refused to move. Suddenly, remembering the sacks of wine, Devaka had them opened, and the contents were distributed among the workers. It worked better than all the curses. The wine erased the fears of the workers who no longer defied the priest. They continued to dig the tunnel, cutting away with furious blows at the slabs of ice, which other workers then dragged away. As soon as the last fatal blow was struck and danger loomed imminently, the workers, with wild shouts, rushed towards the exit. Devaka heard their cries of fear and it filled him with great joy. He limped quickly over to the dry bank of the Shygar. The sound of the splitting wall of ice reached his ears. A mighty jet of water burst out with tremendous force even as the dam of ice began breaking up, and with a thunderous roar, swept away in its path many of the workers, still struggling to get to safety. As the cracks in the dam grew, water surged out with even greater force, dragging out great chunks of ice. The flood from the Shygar swelled. Devaka walked to the side of the lake and thought: Would the water level come down? He could not yet see. But the glacier appeared to come to life and Devaka felt it convulse under his feet. The mountains all around echoed the shuddering

rumble that seemed to swell. In a matter of hours the tremendous burst of water, becoming wilder and wilder, had swept everything along its path. The dam began breaking up in several places. The rumble became a deafening roar as if the very Hymavant itself would be submerged. The rest of the workers had retreated along with the priest. They looked on in fright at the boiling, seething flood that raced into the bed of the Shygar and kept growing even more. The workers trembled with fright. The noise itself seemed unearthly. The Darus covered their ears, attempting to shut out the noise of the earth-shaking tremors that echoed through the mountains. With a roaring sound that drowned out all other noises the final section of the dam of ice collapsed. The waters then gushed out into the open with gruesome force, carrying stones and other debris in their path. Even as the waters surged over the cracks and fell like a mighty waterfall, it loosened massive boulders, sending them crashing and racing towards the Indus.

‘Catastrophe ahead!’ shouted Devaka over the noise into Shakuni’s ear. But Shakuni did not even hear above the noise of the roaring waters and the crashing of boulders.

When Sagaka’s small body of men, uncomfortably crowded in the narrow Shygar valley, faced the first onslaught of the raging flood and heard the ever-increasing thunder in the distance, they knew they had come too late. He ordered his men to climb as high as possible. A neighbouring valley offered an escape route and the sounds of the torrents growing every moment spurred them on with greater speed. One of the men was caught by the onrushing flood of water even as the others climbed to safety. For a long time the waters raged through the Shygar. Then, slowly the water abated and after a long impatient wait, they found that the river could once again be approached. The valley had been swept clean. Sagaka’s men set up camp on the riverside and waited for the return of Devaka.

After some days they spotted the Brahmins riding on their mules. Behind them, in the far distance, trudged the workers. Sagaka rode up to the Brahmins.

‘We are taking you prisoner to Taxila, Devaka.’

‘You are a little late,’ remarked Devaka with a sarcastic tone.

‘But too soon for you.’

‘Let me release my workers first.’

‘We have nothing to do with your workers.’

It was only when they reached the land of Kashmir that Devaka heard the full story of Ashoka's victorious march. The whole of Punjab had submitted to him. Even as Devaka was held prisoner, he managed to pass a message to Shakuni who was to be taken to Pataliputra: a list of the allegations against Ashoka.

'Memorise them, Shakuni. If they dare kill me, then go to the Maharajah, after first consulting Richika. You can bear witness to the Maharajah yourself. Take Gopa with you. Remember, Ashoka must be made to leave the Punjab.'

'Yes, Lord.'

Once in Taxila, they were instantly brought before Ashoka.

'So, it is Devaka again. You ought to have heeded my advice when we were at the Doab.' Devaka stood erect before the Prince, proudly silent.

'You do not answer me! We know who is to blame for the flood. Before your journey to Shygar, you praised my brother Sumana. You know, Devaka, it can be dangerous if certain people praise us, and fortunate when they condemn us. What is it that you want of me?'

'That you step down for the rightful Crown Prince.'

'Then you do not know the Arthashastra of the Brahmin Chanakya. The Maharajah decides who is to be the commander of his army, even who will be the Crown Prince. Do you think my father will allow that right to be taken away from him, even by the Brahmin Devaka?'

The priest remained silent.

'I can have you killed for causing peril to the country.'

'I am a Brahmin.'

'Is he a Brahmin who is guided by so contemptible an emotion as vengeance? Moreover, I can turn you over to the people of the Indus Valley who laugh at you calling yourself a Brahmin. I do not want to advise you again to return to Pataliputra: here you merely affirm my status and give the people an example of what can be expected from Sumana. Tell the Taxilans who you are, Devaka, and you are lost. Go away!'

Devaka stood stunned for a moment. Then, he left the room, keeping his head high.

'Are you letting him go unpunished, O, Prince?'

'No one works harder for me and against Sumana.'

‘The choice of the Brahmin-court was an ill-fated one, my Prince, because they find you opposing them.’

Gopa welcomed Shakuni, who looked thin from hunger and deprivation. The young Brahmin was obviously enraptured by Gopa’s amiability, accepting it as a compliment. He became talkative towards the desirable woman about his activities with Devaka. Soon, Gopa knew all that was to be learnt of Devaka’s revengeful journey. When Gopa described the effects of the devastating flood on the people of the Punjab, of Ashoka’s victorious march through the Punjab, and of him being regarded as the very incarnation of god Shiva, Shakuni stared stonily ahead.

‘Devaka will probably leave Taxila and return to Pataliputra.’

‘And you?’

‘Go with him, of course!’ he said, with a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

‘Stay here! You can do nothing there for Devaka.’

Shakuni’s vanity was tickled by Gopa’s words. Had his love potion worked in his absence after all?

‘Of course, I can. Devaka will ...’ he said, as his voice trailed away. Was this charming woman to be trusted?

‘Now, what will Devaka do?’

‘I cannot say.’

‘Not to an ally?’ Gopa smiled warmly into his eyes. She knew her strength and was playing it.

‘If I may be your guest tonight, Gopa, and you swear to secrecy ...’

‘No. If Prince Kala or one of Prince Ashoka’s men sees you here then neither of us will be safe.’

‘Promise me!’

‘Well, on one condition: If someone from the palace comes you will disappear immediately.’

‘Good.’ And the young man told her of Devaka’s plans: No Indian king would ever feel safe from those who covet his throne, including his own sons. The Maharajah will be told that Ashoka is marshalling a strong army in the Punjab with the intention of conquering the whole of India, just as his grandfather Chandragupta had done.

Meanwhile, Revata, who had stealthily followed Shakuni, overheard the entire conversation. At the same time, Gopa signalled furtively to Revata that Shakuni was to be taken prisoner before nightfall.

Revata barged in, making a display of accusing Gopa of harbouring a pupil of the criminal Devaka. Shakuni was taken away. Moments later, Ashoka was told in all detail Devaka's plans of exacting vengeance. Yet, he was not disconcerted. He expected his wise Father to know better than to accept the priest's word against his.

Tirelessly he worked, doing all that could be done to strengthen his hold in the West. He did not hesitate to take on employees recommended by the ministers, but hold them responsible for their protégés. Ashoka's popularity grew. His interest in all that was new was insatiable and everyone enjoyed telling him what they thought would be of interest to him in Taxila. Medical science fascinated him. Were terrible illnesses such as that of Vjadi's, curable or preventable? With what and how? The hundreds of surgical instruments and their uses greatly interested him as did the various poisons and their antidotes and metals used to cure diseases. Other than Ashoka, it was Revata who was even more eager to learn about the practice of medicine. He had travelled through many countries of India, had seen the ghastly effects of epidemics, the cures attempted, and his natural interest had given him a practical knowledge that was further fuelled by the scholars of Taxila. With the consent of the Prince, he spent his free time in the study of medical science. Ashoka heard from the scholars new theories about the rotation of the planets, lunar eclipses and the place of the sun in the solar system which displaced many of his old notions: What remained of the soma-tale that the moon, the great soma jug, was filled by the sacrifices of the priests for the first fourteen days, and in the two following weeks drunk by the gods? Was it surprising that a Sayana, who had studied at Taxila, had acquired a much wider view of everything that concerned Aryavārtha than the simple sacrificial priests? Anxiously they held on to a rigid dogmatic view of the Vedas. The various philosophical schools might well differ from them, the forest hermits look down upon them but the priests zealously guarded their right to the Vedas to the exclusion of a vast majority of the people. That was why the Buddha was considered an accursed heretic. What he taught did not greatly differ from the Vedānta, Sāṅkhya or Nyāya, but he shared with the Shudra that which was only meant as an arcane secret for the twice-born. Even those who were outside

the pale, like the Chandalas, were welcome! The Brahmin schools were sanctums for new ideas on which the priests debated and reflected within their own circle. They never took any notice of those beyond access to their knowledge. It did not matter to them if the concepts of Saankhya were followed. To the priests, a heretic was not one who discarded all scriptural revelations but one who taught the secret doctrine and the philosophies of the scholars to the Shudras, the Chandalas and the simple Vaishyas. Ashoka seemed to live in another world here. He learned about the indisputable link between cause and effect which he had already sensed long ago. But it was made clear and credible now: Who dared yet ask for animal sacrifices as offerings to honour the gods!

Ashoka was overwhelmed by all the great thoughts. Did it not put into perspective the value of the Vedas and repudiates the power of its sacrificial priests and their offensive sacrifices, the popular beliefs, and re-arrange the prevailing ideas of justice as well?

‘As long as the king controls the priests he controls his people, so control them,’ the Maharajah had said. But the priests could only be controlled as long as one honoured their sacrifices and their elementary views on religion. Where lies the solution?’



BRAHMA'S BENEVOLENT SMILE

At Gopali's urging, Sumana paid occasional visits to the army camp. But those things which inspired the Wild Prince—feats of strength, military skills, and physical exercises—bored him. He was repelled by the crudeness of the warriors. With haughtiness he would ride—always on an elephant—through the large camps of his father's army. That made the right impression, according to his mother. He despised the thousands of men in the pay of his father who did nothing but drink, gamble, and fight each other for its mere pleasure. He only demanded that they pay him respect for the sole reason that he would one day ascend the throne. Later, he would use them to show off before the envoys from foreign countries, before beautiful women and friends. Usually, he made a hasty, uninterested departure. Never did he praise a horseman, an archer, or a chakra thrower. It was only to please Gopali that he paid his visits to the army camp. He abhorred them! Were not those warriors being paid for doing nothing? The Brahmin priests and ministers had enough power to forestall the Emperor from taking any unwise steps. Ashoka was a mad man, perhaps even dangerous, but when he, Sumana, becomes Maharajah, he would render that

wild, self-willed son of the Mauryas harmless. An army must be used to fight battles or at least to display the great might of the Maharajah.

In the afternoon, Bindusara called on Gopali and chanced upon Sumana. Their greetings were aloof.

‘What sadness has overcome my beautiful Gopali and her pleasure-loving son, so that you are bereft of words?’

‘O, mighty Emperor, you have struck the Crown Prince a heavy blow. How then could we not be sad?’

‘What would you have liked me to do, Gopali? Can I make a blind man my overseer even if he is precious to me? Should I send a deaf man to listen to the waves of the Ganga or seek advice from a sacrificial priest on matters of the State? Sumana, there is nothing in you of a warrior. Could I then choose you as the army commander?’

‘I hear that a delegation from Taxila is in the capital to request the appointment of a viceroy. Who will be viceroy of Taxila, Sire?’

‘The one I choose, my Gopali.’

‘Who will you choose, Sire?’

‘The one I think most suitable.’

‘Subhadra’s wild son then?’

‘I am not certain. I shall consider seriously and not take a hasty decision.’

‘My Lord and Emperor, choose my son as the viceroy!’ Gopali fell to her knees before him, kissing his cloak. ‘My son, too, could have subdued the West without any effort! Re-establishing peace where there existed no strife is no great task. How do you know that Sumana would not be as capable as Ashoka? After all, you never offered him the opportunity even though he is your eldest son. At his birth you said, that in this small boy might lie hidden the ruler of a great world as the lotus bud conceals a beautiful flower. Why do you take away from him the pond and the sun? Speak one word, Sire, one word from you is enough, because you are the sacred Maharajah! Do I then mean nothing to you anymore? See, I bow down before you. Give me a sign, and acknowledge that my son, your oldest, is born from your love. May Varuna bless you, and Indra protect you, and send out his rain over your lands.’

‘Stand up, Gopali!’

‘One word, Sire!’

‘I shall not say it. Wait until my decision is made.’

Sumana, in silence, listened and let his mother have her way. He knew that a plea from him to Bindusara would accomplish nothing. If he were to take up with the rough soldiers, if he aired his opinions with the gurus, gave up night-time revelries or even Prakriti, then perhaps his father would listen to him. But what was the Raja’s wealth for! Why should he receive all those whining people, listen and talk to them, appoint officers, pardon criminals? Why pardon them! When he, Sumana, becomes the Maharajah, he would have a magnificent palace built! His harems would house the most beautiful women of the kingdom, because he would be the mightiest king. His festivals would have Pataliputra resounding with music, dance and play! Father was getting old; treasures were flowing into Pataliputra and he did not even use them. A mighty army of drunks, wastrels, and gamblers were enjoying themselves in the camps at the Maharajah’s expense. Why did he not use these idle troops for more elegant games, brilliant performances on special feast days? The beautiful women from the harem, the envoys of foreign monarchs, important messengers who came from all parts of the vast empire—they should all experience joy and be in awe of the Maharajah when they come to the capital, the parks and the palaces!

‘What is my beautiful Prince dreaming of? Of power and glory just like his mother does?’

‘Yes, my father, I love glamour, brilliance and beauty.’

‘And the governing of the land?’

‘For that the empire has its highly paid ministers, its well-cared-for Brahmins, and its avaricious officers.’

‘And why does a land then have a king, my son?’

‘The land has no king. The king has a land!’

‘At least as long as they let him live, and as long as no uprising destroys it or a powerful monarch grabs it, like a tiger does its prey.’

‘Do you not have an army of soldiers who otherwise aimlessly roam around all day?’

‘And what action will you take when disasters strike our land: a flood, famine, drought, epidemics, forest fires, earthquakes?’

‘That is punishment inflicted by the gods. The mighty priests are supposed to prevent such disasters with their sacrifices and to reconcile the gods with the people.’

‘Really ... It has just now become clear to me how simple and beautiful the life of a Maharajah is, my Sumana. It is time you shared your sanguine visions with your subjects!’

‘Then give him the chance, Sire!’ pleaded Gopali.

‘Start with a diligent study of the Arthashastra, my Sumana, perhaps you will then be able to make some sense yet of the duties of the king.’

‘The duty of the king is to be mighty so that everyone can fulfil their duty towards him. So teaches Richika and that is correct ...’

‘So, so ... yes, yes! Your predecessors serve as examples ... Chandragupta ... Bindusara ... you ... You!’...

Bindusara was kept well-informed about Ashoka’s campaign. Every spy from Taxila who tread the palace floors late at night and appeared before the Maharajah brought encouraging reports. For the most part they matched fairly accurately the reports of Ashoka’s own speedy couriers. Only they emphasised on different points. Ashoka reported the death of Virata by his chakra; the spy reported that the Prince had felled the great rebel of Taxila with one look of his eye. Ashoka had reported that the Taxilans had submitted themselves again to the Maharajah’s rule with joy; the spies reported that the subjects, in mortal fear, had not dared to resist. The army commander sent word that the people of the north had been prepared because of the faith the Takkas had in him, and had welcomed him in a festive spirit with rich gifts. They had once again acknowledged the Maharajah as their Lord and had sworn, with their face turned to Pataliputra, their allegiance to Bindusara. The spies recounted an elated story about the Takkas who had gone ahead of the Prince and opened up valley after valley—even the closed-off valley of Kashmir—like magic and in this way compelled the peoples of Darada to submit themselves to the Maharajah. Bindusara was delighted that without much bloodshed Ashoka had succeeded in restoring peace in the difficult West. His faith in his ‘wild’ son had been strengthened and his earlier suspicions slowly abated.

Devaka then came back to Pataliputra with Shakuni.

The first place to which Devaka went was the Brahmin-court in order to speak with the head priest. Richika ordered him to go as soon as possible before the Maharajah and in all righteous indignation warn him of the dangers that lay in the West. He, Richika, would prepare the ministers.

Bindusara ordered Devaka to appear that very evening before the ministers' council. Seated on his ivory throne, the Emperor ordered that Devaka be led in. The priest entered and bowed deeply before the king.

‘Stand up, Devaka. You say that you bring disturbing news from the far West. Let me and my ministers hear what you have observed in the land of the disaffected.’

‘Almighty and gracious Majesty, who rules the world in wisdom and whom the gods bless with fortune and prosperity in his land, it is love for the great Maharajah and love for his beautiful kingdom that compel me to warn you of what is happening in Panchanada. The gods have given unmistakable signs of their dissatisfaction about the accursed people on the other side of the Sarasvati. In the middle of the dry season, they have let loose a tidal wave from the heights of the Himalayas over the Indus Valley, larger than any the sacred Manasarovar lake could hold. It has flooded whole regions, destroyed harvests, and driven out many people. They do not want the holy Maharajah, who keeps watch over the Vedas and her priests, to be deprived of a considerable part of his kingdom. And yet, more people, more sinful than the Chandalas in Madhyadesa, are gathering behind the army commander. Bactria and Arachosa—even the almost unreachable Kashmir—are welcoming the Prince with joy. A mission from the Syrian king spent many hours deliberating with the army commander. Not one blow was struck, not one punished for the murder of the Brahmins, nor was even one of Your Majesty's officers avenged. I warned the Taxilans of their sinful deeds; they laughed. The army commander has even disrupted funeral ceremonies and snatched the widow of a dead tribal chief away to Taxila, where she now lives in a sinful palace. And the people of the West applaud the Prince at everything he does.’

‘And Kullika, his guru and purohita, does he not warn the Prince?’

‘Kullika approves without ever opposing whatever the Prince decides. Unreliable employees from the cursed peoples are appointed as palace representatives instead of Aryan men from Madhyadesa.’

‘And were the government officers from Madhyadesa reliable, my Devaka?’

Devaka wavered.

‘I had no way of knowing, gracious Majesty. Prince Ashoka has, when he wants it, a powerful army at his disposal. Moreover, a large segment of

the army in Pataliputra reveres him. In spite of you, because of his independence, a formidable power is growing in your empire which is in the hands of only one man in whom you have placed all your faith. He has accumulated great treasures with which he can maintain an army. I believe that the holy Maharajah would not wish this. The peace of the empire will be dependent not on the wisdom of the Maharajah or his advisors but on the attitude of a young Prince who thinks himself capable of conducting his affairs without experienced and sensible Brahmin ministers, on a Prince in whom the highest varna of your empire has never had faith. I wish to warn you that a power, even greater than the holy Ganga in monsoon, now stands before you. The Prince has various dangerous people in his entourage. He took into his service a certain Prince Kala of Mayula, a lowly Kshatriya, who does not hesitate to punish Brahmins with hellish torture and turn them over, helpless, to the wild animals of the woods. This Prince Kala is the best friend of the army commander. This Kala will later go with him to Pataliputra, and I fear that even the sacred Maharajah will not be safe from him. You see, highly revered Majesty, that not a single link is lacking in the chain that could be forged around Magadha's neck of fortune.'

Devaka kept silent. The ministers looked at the Maharajah, their faces grave with concern.

'We thank the pious Devaka for the love and concern he has for this great empire and for his Maharajah. But in such an important issue as this one we cannot go by the testimony of one witness alone, even if that witness is as capable as Devaka. I sent Ashoka to Taxila after careful thought, because he is the most competent. I cannot fathom whether the honourable Devaka quite knows everything. Do you know why my son succeeded so easily? Are you aware of the reasons behind his decisions, honourable Devaka?'

'No, mighty Emperor.'

'I dispatched him to the West to subdue the rebellious subjects. Now that he has subdued them I can hardly disapprove of what he did. How large is his army now, honourable Devaka? Has it been supplemented by many tribes?'

'Gracious Majesty, I had mentioned that Prince Ashoka could, if he wanted, have a large army.'

'That is right, and what did Ashoka discuss with the Syrians?'

‘Naturally, that is not known to me, Great Maharajah.’

‘What do you know of the army here in Pataliputra, honourable Devaka? You were out in the West, were you not?’

‘Nothing, O Emperor, other than that it cares greatly for the warlike Prince.’

‘The pious Devaka will have to acknowledge that his concern is based on somewhat loose sand. You start, my Devaka. Suppose, I claimed, that it was the wish of the pious Devaka that Prince Ashoka’s mission should fail, so he may promote another as army commander and viceroy to Taxila, and I claimed further that because people said—shall we say something foolish, based on some loose sand—that he carried tales to Ashoka’s army camp to undermine the Prince’s influence. Let us say he released snakes along their path to put fear into the hearts of the soldiers, does all he can at the Royal court of Mathura to ensnare the Prince, then murders a king’s daughter just because she is unwilling to obey him, then attempts to incite the Taxilans to rise against the army commander who has been appointed by the Maharajah himself; and more of such of what I call nonsensical rumours. You understand, Devaka. Then, would you not, noble Brahmin, be vexed and rightly so, that I had taken measures based on such a shaky ground!’

Devaka had gone pale during this indictment.

‘Then it would have to be proved, righteous Maharajah!’

‘Your reasoning is clearer than even the brightness of Surya in the month of Jyeshtha. I, too, would like some witnesses to come forth, since I alone appointed my son to this onerous position.

The Maharajah commanded: ‘Jala, send Sokota in.’ As soon as Sokota entered the hall, the king asked: ‘Sokota, tell us what you know about the great flood that occurred along the Indus in the dry season. The honourable Devaka says that it was a punishment of the gods. First, swear the oath that you will tell only the truth.’

Sokota then gave a true account of the expedition to the Shygar, to which the Maharajah replied: ‘So, it is the honourable Devaka who had the mine-workers break up the massive dam of ice which had shifted into the bed of the river. When, upon the whole dam breaking up, the water broke through, it flooded into the Indus inundating everything in its way. That is the cause of the flood.’

‘Now, Sela ... Sela, do the people of Panchanada support Ashoka?’

‘Every one of the peoples that submitted, O, Mighty Maharajah, had to take a solemn oath and swear, with their eyes directed to Pataliputra, allegiance not to the Prince but to Bindusara. Prince Ashoka never let himself be called anything other than the commander of the army. The ministers’ council of Taxila has asked Prince Ashoka to become viceroy of the Punjab. The Prince’s answer was that there was only one who had the power to make that decision: Maharajah Bindusara.’

‘Revata ... Revata, what did Devaka do to warn the Taxilans about the army commander?’

‘Mighty Maharajah, Devaka harangued the people in the streets of Taxila that Prince Sumana should be the Crown Prince. He cautioned the people against the present governing council and urged that they ask for the Crown Prince as the viceroy, or else they would be punished by the Dasyus. Their sins lay not in their uprising but that they had not asked for Sumana to be the viceroy.’

‘Who is Prince Kala? Answer directly, my Revata, and keep nothing from me. Declare the truth before the highest court.’

‘Prince Kala was engaged to be married to Princess Madri of Mathura, O, Maharajah. This Brahmin admitted in my presence that he had Princess Madri killed because she refused his order to marry Prince Ashoka. Prince Kala retaliated by punishing Devaka but spared his life for he still lives. At present, Prince Kala is Prince Ashoka’s highly respected second-in-command, who reveres the Prince for his wise decisions and just measures.’

The Maharajah remained silent for a long time. An uneasy silence, with which he was happy, fell upon the assembly. No one dared to speak. Devaka, by then deathly pale, stood before the Maharajah. Not a muscle moved in his proud face. Finally, the Maharajah broke the silence.

‘We wish to thank the honourable Devaka for his great concern for our empire and his attempts to protect the West. However, we have established that he has made flawed judgements here and there and has needlessly meddled in affairs that are of concern to me alone. I warn him sternly not to oppose my decisions in the future. In the governance of the kingdom it is my decisions alone that count, honourable Devaka. You have no right to interfere. We will not ask you why you left for the West as an able man and returned as a despicable cripple. Show the honourable priest out of the palace, Jala.’

With rage in his heart, Devaka left the Council Hall. His hatred had rebounded on him because of the alertness of two Mauryas. Richika received his report with coldness.

‘Retire to the forest, Devaka. Your presence here is inimical to the Brahmin-court. Learn prudence and control from Prince Ashoka who does not betray himself even in agitation or zealousness.’

Devaka bowed humbly.

‘Make sure Ashoka returns from the West during the month of Jyeshtha, Lord; the road to Pataliputra is difficult and dangerous then.’

‘Well now, wise ministers ... You see that I have unmasked a witness, who as far as I am concerned may regard the doing of his duty in good faith but is unreliable about what is happening in Taxila. The senior-most minister of my son in Taxila is among those who have travelled with my witnesses to the capital.’

Bindusara nodded. Vimalamitra was led in and introduced to the council.

‘Highly honoured and wise Vimalamitra, you are, Prince Ashoka informs us, his senior-most and wisest minister. We would like to hear from you how the rebellion in your beautiful city has been quelled in so short a time. ‘

In plain words Vimalamitra gave an account of everything that had happened in his city and thanked the Maharajah for sending such a wise commander.

‘Who sent you to Pataliputra, my revered Vimalamitra?’

‘The ministers’ council asked me as the most senior to travel to Pataliputra and your army commander permitted me to do so. I thought that I should be the one to represent them in the best interests of our city. The peoples of the Punjab are easily persuaded to rebel. Through their trade, they come more in contact with peoples farther out West and hence are not so directly under your exalted and wise governing,’ Vimalamitra explained.

‘What negotiations did the tributary ruler make with the Syrian king?’

‘There were no negotiations, though Virata had wanted it, Gracious Majesty. When the envoys came I sent them to Prince Ashoka. The Prince made it clear to them that there was no question of seeking help from the Syrians.’

‘And why has the wise Vimalamitra come to Pataliputra?’

‘We fear, O Mighty Emperor, that you will recall your army commander now that peace has been restored. This would be a serious setback for us. Prince Ashoka rules with wisdom and insight and not with his army. In a short time, he has established a government that is more just than there ever has been in this part of your empire. We believe that you would be the most blessed of Maharajahs for us, O, noble Emperor, if you were to appoint your son as the viceroy of the West. Then I assure you confidently that no rebellion would ever raise its head. Prince Ashoka has shown us what a holy and just Majesty is seated on the ivory throne in Pataliputra. If he became viceroy of Taxila, we would also enjoy the blessings of your rule, just as in Madhyadesa.’

It was clear that Vimalamitra’s words made an impression. With great interest the Emperor and the ministers asked questions. Each was convinced of his honesty and reliability. But when the dignified minister left, the Brahmin Khallataka spoke thus:

‘Great Maharajah, we are very pleased that you had in your wisdom sent the right person to be the commander. And yet I must point out the risk you take if you appoint Ashoka as the viceroy of Taxila. I believe in his wisdom and his capabilities. However, Prince Sumana is your eldest son! I still do not see why you should exclude him from the throne. Sumana has not yet given any proof of his capabilities. Neither has Prince Ashoka, O, wise Emperor, before you appointed him as the commander. Should one tempt the gods by doing other than what the shastras declare to be right? Our laws are sacred laws. Devaka has testified to his own incompetence but about one of his claims he was right. A force is growing in the West which is in the hands of only one person and it is not the Maharajah.’

‘My noble Khallataka, if I expect complete honesty and loyalty from anyone then it is from you, and that is why I will once again explain my decision about this matter: I refer to you the third prakarana, 3, of the *Arthashastra* which states: ‘*If a king acts contrary to his duties and does not control his emotions then he will quickly run aground even though he possesses all the earth.*’ In the same prakarana, 10, is stated: ‘*These and many other kings who yielded to the range of the above mentioned six enemies¹ and did not curb their emotions, went down along with their loved ones and empire.*’ The question for me then is: Which of my two sons controls his emotions? Who gives in to the six enemies? Believe me, my

dear Khallataka, that it is not an easy decision since it concerns the happiness of my house and Aryavarta. My soul is mine and I can make of it what I will but my country is merely mine for as long as I live, then I must give it up to the one I appoint as my successor. In the second prakarana it is stated: *'A king who rules with sagacity, with the welfare of his subjects at heart, possesses the earth without rivalry and makes all creatures happy.'* So, when I appoint the next Maharajah, I have a very responsible decision to make for which I may have to endure the pains of hell but it may also be at the expense of my subjects' fortune. The thirteenth prakarana of the Arthashastra requires from me: *'If he has a son who prominently displays courage, entrust him with the position of army commander or Crown Prince'*. That is what is required of me, O senior-most minister of my great and beautiful empire. A bad choice will not reflect on you but on me. Good fortune not of this generation but of the next depends on my choice and not on your wisdom. Believe me, my Khallataka, I shall choose such as my duty requires of me, such as my conscience whispers to my soul. I would prefer that the gods ruin me than that I ruin myself. I would rather have the Brahmin Ministers' Council curse me than the people of India. Thus, I wish to make my own choice however much I value your wise advice ...'

The council was silent ...

Khallataka left the palace alone, deep in thought. He was torn between his respect for the Maharajah and the legacy of his class which, without a doubt, supported the legitimacy of Sumana's claim. Every one of the Maharajah's arguments assailed him, against which rose the intensity of his own convictions. Had the Maharajah not got himself entangled by maya? Was it not fear of his wild son that determined his decisions ... thoughts about Ajatasatru and other patricides? But was not honouring the Shastras and respecting the Vedas the first and last obligation? Or, was it that He really did not trust the empire and its subjects to the lecherous Sumana?

Khallataka did not notice Prince Sumana returning from the park, where he and his friends had dallied with the daughters of ministers and highly placed palace officers. Sumana called out excitedly to the Minister who, deeply engrossed in his thoughts, did not look up. Then Sumana took off a gauntlet and on a reckless impulse, jestingly, threw it at the pondering minister, striking him exactly on the head. Khallataka was shocked but controlled himself. He stared at the Prince for some time. He could not

understand how this young man dared to insult so deeply the senior-most minister of his father's empire.

'Forgive me, honourable Khallataka,' called the Prince with a laugh. 'I did not realise I could throw so well!'

'I will praise the accuracy of your skilful eye and hand and forgive you your deed, Prince Sumana, but never the disposition that drove it ...'

He then moved on. Laughing mockingly, Sumana disappeared into the palace.

But Khallataka pondered: 'This is a Prince who does not even know how to maintain his dignity. Today, if he throws a gauntlet in the face of the senior-most minister, tomorrow he throws the laws in the faces of his subjects.'

Emperor Bindusara had lain down to rest. Many things left his mind deeply perturbed: the agitated ministers' council; Vimalamitra's words; Devaka's deceit; and Khallataka's stern warnings. Was he doing the rightful thing? Ashoka had fully lived up to his high expectations up till now. But now the insidious warning of the priest tossed about in his mind. Depend on ... Ashoka? The Wild Ashoka! A growing force in his empire which he could not estimate but possibly bigger than his own! Sumana lacked the will and the capacity to use such a power. But not Ashoka: the whole West ... the army of Pataliputra ... Iran ... What would prevent the zestful Prince from seizing the power that he longed for! Bimbisara-Ajatasatru-Udayibhada² ... BindusaraAshoka ... Had he made the wrong choice? No, no! What needed to be done was to rectify the possibilities that were taking shape. Strange, that he was no longer sure of his son whom he himself had defended so strongly. In the ministers' council he had been calm; here in his own bed, no longer. Every potential became unnaturally magnified in the deadly silence of his sleeping quarters. Could his murderers be in the palace now? The fear that he himself had created! He had not listened to the advice of the Brahmin ministers ... Would it indeed be necessary to place watchful priests beside such fiery Princes, just as a mahout with the elephant? Was his confidence in his gifted son too great? And Sokota's testimony? And Revata's? And Vimalamitra's? But the wild tribes of the Punjab ... and the army of Pataliputra! His agitation only got worse; it was as if it was choking him. He got out of bed and by the weak light of a single lamp paced back and forth. This calmed him.

He summoned Çari to come.

‘Çari, let the wise Brahmin Sayana be alerted that I wish to see him tomorrow morning as early as possible.’ The Maharajah finally calmed down. If need be, Ashoka could return, then he would at least be free of the whip of the West. That is, if he would not come with a large army.

Sayana arrived early for the Maharajah’s summons.

‘The Prince will surely make a claim to the throne of Pataliputra but his father will never have to fear him. I have heard him speak of the Maharajah with great respect and Kullika knows him to the core and feels there are no risks of danger to the Maharajah.’

‘But what if the flush of easy victories in the entire Punjab has clouded his feelings and thoughts?’

Sayana shook his head. ‘Ashoka’s mind is too clear for that. His sudden temper sometimes leads him to do the unexpected but it is surprising how even then his mind works with clarity.’

‘Yet, it may be undesirable to create such a great risk within my empire, my Sayana. Were Sumana in the West, I would laugh. But Ashoka! He does not refrain from any deed if he ... he ...’

‘Sees the justice in it, O, Maharajah.’

‘Yes. My faith has momentarily been shaken, my honourable Sayana. Shiva shot a bolt of distrust into my heart. Devaka has twisted all the facts but one remark struck me and frightens me in spite of myself. Within my empire in the West is built up a great force and only one person, Ashoka, controls it. I do not want to depend on one person, not even if he is my most beloved son.’

Sayana knew the mighty ruler’s fear.

‘Can Ashoka be spared in Panchanada?’

‘All is peaceful there.’

‘Do you have a pressing reason, great Emperor, to call him back?’

‘Currently the most-senior minister from Taxila is in Pataliputra begging me to appoint Ashoka as viceroy so that the Punjab too can benefit from my just governing. Ashoka has arranged a good government there in a short time soon after the revolt was quelled.’

Sayana nodded.

‘Yes, yes, O, Maharajah, your choice was perfect! What will be your decision now so that Brahma’s benevolent smile may brighten your vast

empire? Is there no new task with which you can challenge Ashoka's prowess and preferably in a less dangerous place than Taxila that could take away the Maharajah's worries? His abundant vitality needs a channel, training for his more than rare manas. If you enforce a life of inactivity on him then he will seek his own release, and, as much as I trust him, his will to achieve might be directed to something less pleasing to the Maharajah. What assignment do you have for this bright, talented mind, O, Maharajah?

'Conquer the East?' asked Bindusara, after hesitating. 'Then Prince Ashoka would once more have an army under his command, this time much larger. Moreover, it would be less agreeable to Brahma. His mind is capable and inclined to more glorious works than war.'

'You are right, my wise Sayana. Ujjain? ... Ujjain! A man is required in the southwest part of the empire who can organise and improve the government and especially monitor the levies on the merchandise of the many caravans that move day after day from the ocean at Bharuchkacha through the Vindhya to Madhyadesa and the Punjab and back. That is a good idea, my Sayana! The peoples of the southwest live more scattered; they are more peaceful and of good sense but feel they are independent from the distant capital. What a glorious thought, noble Sayana! And if we then send Sumana to Taxila as viceroy, he can prove there that he can be just as good a Maharajah as Ashoka.'

'Is that not a dangerous test, O, Maharajah?'

'No. If Sumana fails there, he is lost. Then I will send Ashoka a second time. And the gods would have spoken once again. It would have been easier for me to appoint Sumana as the successor to the throne, and after my death to jeopardise my empire to strife, war and disintegration. To hand it over to the ignorance of my oldest son ... Will the great empire continue to exist as it is? It will require a Maharajah with a keen mind and indefatigable energy, a concentrated willpower and a great and all-encompassing love; one who does not shirk from sacrificing with nerves of steel anything which opposes him along his way. I know of but one such person in the house of the Mauryas, O, Sayana. My conscience compels me, however, to put it to the test. I will perform fire oblations, pray to the gods daily to grant me wisdom in my decisions. Your advice was a ray of light, noble Sayana.'

In the second half of the day, in which the Maharajah served the interests of the city-dwellers and those of the farmers, he once again

received Vimalamitra.

‘You understand my wise and good Vimalamitra how it hurts me deep in my heart that I cannot honour—at least for now—the request of the ministers of Taxila. It gives me great pleasure that the government in the Punjab has been properly settled and—I hope— secured by my son. But my empire requires the attention of capable men. A few tributary States have need of some special attention from the very best of my men. That is why I sent Ashoka to Taxila. Another part of India now requires his presence. And Prince Sumana shall be viceroy of Taxila. I know that a wise council of ministers will stand by him and capable officers will carry out his orders. It will please me more, Vimalamitra, if you as the most-senior minister will support and advise him, for the benefit of the Punjab.’

Vimalamitra had bowed his head.

‘It is said, gracious and righteous Majesty, that your eldest son is strongly influenced by the Brahmin priests. Forgive me, but I feel that his coming to rule the land west of the Sarasvati will be disastrous. I know the people of the Punjab. I had said yesterday, O Maharajah, that I could assure you with complete confidence that there would be no revolt with Prince Ashoka as the Viceroy of the Punjab. I am old and have been through much. But as far as I can see, I can no longer give you this assurance. I wish to trust your wisdom but it is with great concern that I see your commander leaving our lands.’

‘Noble Vimalamitra, the course of coming events will indicate my decisions. If the other ministers and officers are like you then I have no doubts about the fortune of the peoples out there.’



MAHADEVA ASHOKA

Ashoka's inquisitive nature was the reason for the active exchange of ideas that was now taking place with scholars and artists who, as was customary, accompanied the envoys of Antioch Soter. He listened with amazement as they spoke of the giant stone temples—in contrast to the wooden structures of the Aryans—of the Hellenic works of art; of the bulwarks of Pericles, of the marble statues of the gods, and especially of the inscriptions of the Achaemenidians¹ carved in stone, which would forever proclaim the praise of their illustrious victories.

‘Which victories?’ the Prince asked.

‘Of the bloody battles they waged.’

‘Then do they find illustrious deeds of war to be so important that they are to be immortalised?’

‘They made the Syrian empire great.’

‘My father Bindusara's empire is larger than that of Antioch Soter. He is renowned for bringing peace, prosperity and happiness to the people. No stone inscriptions glorify his deeds in war.’

‘Our friendly hostess has decorated her house with statues of gods from Egypt and Hellas. Does the Prince of India not find them beautiful?’

‘Certainly, but they appear to be copies of people, though well-formed.’

‘That is how they are meant to be: a spiritualisation of beauty in human form, raised to perfection.’

‘But isn’t a healthy, living person more beautiful! If you want to behold the eventual beauty of a human being, then look at Gopa, alive, moving, and in her eyes the glow of happiness of a life regained, with the strength of youthful abundance. How can you compare the rigid beauty of the Greek Athena or Aphrodite with her? And you say this represents the spiritualisation of beauty ...’

‘It is the beauty which has matured in the soul of the artist, whose spirit is the most receptive, and whose hands possess the rarest skill for expression, O, Prince.’

‘But how can you create in stone that which does not lend itself to imitation of its real beauty? Your Gods are people. How do you know they are beautiful people? You hardly know if similar creatures live on the other side of the Himalayas. Are horses, elephants and snakes found on the other side of the worlds’ oceans, like here? The Egyptian sculptors are more accurate than the Greek or Syrian, as they create forms of gods which are far removed from human forms.’

‘How, O, high Prince, would you then represent the gods who are more beautiful and exalted than the human being?’

‘The most notable characteristic of the gods should not be their likeness to humans but their strength, their omniscience, their power which far surpasses human power; their all-seeing, all-hearing nature, beside which man is but a small ant in the endless jungle.’

‘Then it will be the imagination of the people of India and not the sense of beauty the Hellenics possess that should serve as a guide for your artists, O, Prince. Even if the beauty of Hellenic art ever touches you, you will never be drawn away from your own view because it has grown from your sense of humanity which is expressed so strongly in your spirit, noble Prince.’

‘Maybe, you are right insofar that you in your different world express much the same as our sages and hermits say: one can only know the Brahman-Atman in oneself, because every living creature is merely the unfolding of the Brahman, to which it later returns. Our art must express that idea of oneness or it would not be of India.

When Ashoka arrived at the palace, one of the ministers was waiting for him. A delegation had arrived in Taxila to inform the army commander that a desert tribe from Rajputana was frequently raiding their land and their livestock. Ashoka forthwith summoned the Ministers' Council to an assembly and received the delegation. On Ashoka's thorough questioning, they reported that the tribe had lost most of their livestock to drought and now were trying to supplement their herds with the stolen livestock.

‘And what do you want from me?’

‘Perhaps, the Maharaja's army commander could dispatch a troop of warriors to punish the bandits or drive them out or kill them.’

The Ministers' council thought that a good-sized military force could quickly put an end to the depredations of the Rajputanas.

‘And you, my Kullika?’

‘I believe that I know how my Prince thinks in situations such as these. Most likely, the Rajputanas are suffering from a famine. Without livestock such desert tribes will starve.’

‘You are right, my Guru. This very day we will prepare a hundred bullock carts to carry grain from the imperial granary and two bullock carts with valuable goods will follow as soon as possible. We will leave early tomorrow morning to bring the robbers around to peace. The Minister Pathachali will make sure that we take along medicines and physicians under his direction. I wish to get to know these tribes.

After several days of travelling along the southern route to Indraprastha and along the Sataadru, Ashoka arrived with his troops and physicians to the whereabouts of the raiding tribes, while Sagka was ordered to gather livestock in exchange for valuables.

What Ashoka saw in the Rajputana camp exceeded all of his imagination. The nomad camp had been divided into two sections, one contained the healthy and the other, the infirm. Those Rajputanas who were not ill did not even think of fighting Ashoka's skilled warriors. They threw down their weapons and waited in patient supplication for the punishment they were certain would befall them. Ashoka had already been given a brief—yet accurate—assessment of the situation: misery from the vagaries of nature.

‘Bring the chief!’ A man, thinner than any penitent he had ever seen in Magadha, approached reverently.

‘You have stolen livestock from the Katthiyas. Do you know that the Emperor punishes theft severely?’

‘Sire, half of my tribe has died of hunger, the other half lies over there, ill. Not even one-tenth of our livestock is left. Our whole tribe will die out if we cannot get livestock and food and water. Desperation has made us all cattle thieves. Can we let our wives and children starve, and our cows and horses, too, they who have kept us alive? Do you have the courage to visit the place where our sick people stay, O, Prince? Pestilence haunts the place and takes away the ones who have no resistance left. Hardly any water is to be found. And whatever is left of it conceals death in every drop.’

Ashoka nodded to Kullika and the guide. They went with the chief through the camp. Ashoka would never forget what he saw. For days after, the horror pursued him: the most gruesome face of death, bodies sapped of life, defenceless youth, a mockery of the sweetness of it. None of the ill ones paid heed to the important visitors. Those lying here were only to be handed over to Yama.

‘Here *Mahadeva*², as god of death, reigns, Sire.’

‘Shiva can kill this tribe with one ray of his eye. Rudra refuses these poor his nectar of heaven. Why did you not help?’ asked Ashoka of the guide and complainant.

‘We dare not help those whom the gods punish, Lord. Their sins in this or previous lives are to blame. We do not defy the will of the gods who brought drought upon us as well.’

‘Did you accept the punishment of the Dasyus, when the Indus rose recently to unprecedented heights? Or, did you store your harvest and livestock?’

‘We stored everything, Lord, because the gods warned us through Prince Ashoka.’

‘Well now, Ashoka warns you once again. Shiva wishes to save these people!’

With untiring energy, Ashoka organised the rescue of the Rajputanas. Physicians were put to work, dead bodies were burned, water caravans introduced until the monsoons arrived; herds were supplemented; and under the supervision of the capable physicians of Taxila, the feeding and healing of the infirm began. Under Sagaka’s firm control, in a short time, the

inherently strong tribe of shepherds recovered from the blows that a whimsical nature had felled on them. Ashoka had long since returned to Taxila. But in the memories of the Rajputanas, he was a deity, the Mahadeva Ashoka, who had descended from the heavens. He had driven out pestilence and famine with one wave of his mighty arm. Their happiness returned and with that, the knowledge that the Mahadeva protected them. They called him, 'Ashoka'.



DOUBT

It was Satyavat who, as Bindusara's express, brought Ashoka the unpleasant announcement: Prince Sumana was to be the viceroy to the Punjab; Ashoka has to return to Pataliputra to take up a new commission, and all yet in Jyeshtha, the hottest month. Ashoka sensed an imminent battle.

Through his intensive spying, Satyavat was able to acquaint Ashoka about what took place in Pataliputra: Gopali's plea on Sumana's behalf, Devaka's accusations, Bindusara's defence, Vimalamitra's request, and Sayana's arrival at the palace. Jala, however, divulged nothing of what had been discussed within the secret chambers of the Maharajah.

Ashoka could not imagine what decision the Emperor could have taken about him. Had the machinations resulted in Sumana being appointed the Crown Prince, after all? But then, what about the Emperor's justification? Had Vimalamitra's request aroused suspicion? For one short moment a thought assailed him: He could, with ease, assemble a large army in the Punjab. With Sagka and Sela back in the capital, Pataliputra's army would be easily won over to his side. Then force Father to appoint him viceroy of the Punjab and heir to the throne. But what foolishness! His father would remain the sacred Maharajah as long as he wished. The days of Ajatasatru and Udayabhada were long gone! The Maharajah should be inviolable and

sacred so that no one can disregard his existence nor question the actions he takes ... the way a deity is considered sacred. Only Sumana should not be the Emperor after him! If Bindusara were to choose Sumana as heir apparent then it could only be due to the influence of his Brahmin advisors. He would not tolerate their supremacy! With more calm than Sasarman had expected, the Prince said:

‘Sasarman, we will return to Pataliputra on new moon day which is two days from today. In Jyeshtha ...’

‘The heat will be unbearable, O, Prince! That is why the Brahmins wish your return now!’

‘Then we will travel only early morning and late evening, if need be, by night. And you, my Kullika, will you return with me to the capital? I want to travel as speedily as possible. Or, if you wish you can stay here for the time being.’

‘Are you taking the army along?’

‘No. Only a few highly skilled men for the food supplies and a few swift horses and bullock carts ...’

‘Then I will return with you, O, Prince.’

Ashoka looked at him, surprised.

‘So, my Kullika, you also think that the Maharajah has retracted his favour to me?’

‘I am afraid so. The situation in the Punjab is not such that Sumana’s arrival could be expected with confidence. There must be a very serious reason for the Maharajah to recall you. Devaka is not the only one who wants it.’

‘No.’

That same evening, the council of ministers assembled and Ashoka informed them of the Maharajah’s decision.

‘So, Vimalamitra’s request has been refused, O, Prince!’

‘Apparently, honoured minister.’

‘Who will replace you, noble Lord?’

‘The eldest son of the Maharajah will become viceroy of the Punjab.’

‘Prince Sumana!’

‘You have said it.’

‘Do you wish to take a large army from Panchanada with you, O, Prince? The entire western region will be at the ready at just one word from

you,’ said Kampaka, the minister of trade. The others sat motionless.

‘I wish to obey the wise Maharajah. He will have good reasons for summoning me to Pataliputra. The army will stay here under Prince Kala. Your officers are honest and capable men. I hope the Prince will be a blessing for your land.’

No one spoke.

‘Do you wish to stay here, O, Prince?’

‘That would mean a revolt and I will not even think of that!’

‘The Mauryas come from the West and do not prosper under the Brahmin priests who consider the Mauryas as Shudras, and thus, according to them, despicable beings.’

‘But they will have to acknowledge the Maharajah and his successors as their overlords or their varna will cease to exist. I do not wish to be disloyal to my Father nor to the peoples of Aryarvartha.’

‘In return for your straightforward honesty, O Prince, may I on behalf of the entire council of ministers and the Punjab proclaim: The Maharajah and you, O Prince, can rely on the Punjab as long as you live. You have but to call.’

‘The new viceroy has not yet given any occasion for this proclamation, my honoured friends.’

‘But the countless deeds of the commander of Bindusara’s army surely have, honoured Prince.’

‘I thank you for your friendly opinion. Maybe, we will yet need each other.’

‘When are you leaving, O, Prince?’

‘In two days.’

‘May we know which road you will be taking?’ asked Kampaka.

‘The shortest.’

‘Sire, being a merchant, I know the roads to Madhyadesa very well. It is fatal to travel in Jyeshtha. If I may give you some good advice: choose the road that lies along the foot of the western Himalayas. Do not bother with Indraprastha and Sakala but go through Hastinapura and Ayodhya and on to Pataliputra. The desert road is deadly for both man and animal in this month. The West winds drive the hot desert sands like a continuous burning cloud of dust over the eastern Punjab night and day. The people shut themselves up in their homes and the waters are dried up. How do you think

of coping when you hardly know the dangers out there? When you take the northern route, you have to cross many rivers but before Ashadh they will not be difficult to cross.'

'What does Satyavat think of this advice?'

'The Brahmins of the court have vociferously demanded that you return in Jyeshtha and take the shortest route, O, Prince.'

The uneasy silence that followed was broken by the Prince, who said calmly, 'I thank you greatly for your wise advice, my ministers. We shall gratefully follow it and take the road through Ayodhya. Furthermore, I kindly request that you support Prince Kala of Mayula in his difficult task. He will be able to continue my work as long as he has your support.'

In the evening, before departing, Ashoka, Revata, Kala, Kullika and Saga gathered at Gopa's house. The hostess had Nila's daughters offer them cooling drinks, fruit, cakes and other tasty savouries.

'Are not you afraid that glittering stars will obscure Chandra's light or at least diminish it?'

Gopa laughed. 'Maybe, that would not be so bad in some circumstances and even be pleasant for me.'

'Whose attention should they divert?'

'Of someone who may soon appear in Taxila.'

'Do not play with powerful men to whom a beautiful woman is as alluring as an *areka* blossom is to a butterfly but who value her less than their slave.'

'Lord, I am not playing but making calculative moves. It may be that you need to know what is happening in Taxila. There are men for whom pleasures are more important than the work they have to perform. It may even be necessary that they neglect their tasks. I shall make sure that you are kept informed of the actions of the opponent.'

'Gopa, you and the girls should not take risks!'

Gopa could not conceal her feelings. She threw herself at Ashoka's feet.

'Sire, I did not want to offer my life for a self-serving priest but I will, at any time for you! From morning to evening I make oblations to Shiva. I shall serve you in Taxila as long as I breathe. No sacrifice is too great for me. Not even for a single moment do I wish to weaken in my watchfulness towards you ... and Shiva.'

Ashoka was deeply touched. Taking both her hands he raised her up and led her back to her seat.

‘I believe I ask too much of you, my friends.’

‘Never!’

‘May Shiva, the benevolent, bless you with wisdom and light, my Gopa. May Varuna protect your house and give you his clarity. I do not know what awaits me. Maybe, we will not see each other again, maybe we will. In any case I thank you for what you did and will yet do.’

As it happened on Ashoka’s arrival, all Taxila had gathered along the road to Hastinapura. It moved the young commander greatly. In Pataliputra he was used to being feared, even hated. In this far-flung outpost of the western region of the empire, there was more tolerance among the people and their knowledge of the sciences gave them a much broader view. The Prince, who had no feelings for the ludicrous ceremonies of the priests, discovered like-mindedness here and this was recognised by the people. Ashoka’s interest in the lives of all ranks of people, their art, their science, their trade, products and goods, came from a certain approval of, and an inclination to their way of life. This not only soothed their vanity but gave them confidence in the bold son of the Mauryas. They felt his leaving the city and the Punjab would be disastrous. Sumana’s fame held little attraction for them. Flower wreaths and garlands decorated the road as far as the city-dwellers had spread out. The citizens knelt down along the road as a mark of respect for the young Prince. They flung as offerings the most beautiful flowers before his steed’s legs. Slowly, he rode between the wide rows of people, his flashing chakra held up in farewell. When he came to the end of the road he reined his horse around and looked for some time in contemplation down the road to the city on the high rock. He then raised his chakra and let the bright reflecting rays glitter over the inhabitants of Taxila. Then, he sped ahead towards the capital. The hot desert winds and the clouds of dust, fine as powder, seemed to penetrate everything. At times it threatened to take both their breath and sight away. The journey now became more arduous. Kullika could not withstand the strenuous ride. At Kausambi, Ashoka reluctantly left him behind in a monastery for Buddhist monks. Ashoka himself wished to move on quickly, driven towards the uncertainty which awaited him far ahead.

Much earlier than he was expected, Ashoka arrived one evening at sunset in the capital. The hundreds of towers on the strong walls of palisades were lit sharply in the evening glow of the setting sun. His troop, small and dusty, rode in tight-knit order through the City gates. The guards shot up from their sleepy rest, alarmed, and everywhere his arrival was met with great surprise. It was known that the Wild Prince had been recalled and that the Crown Prince was to become viceroy of the Punjab. How this tamer of the revolt in the West would take that appointment, no one could say; yet everyone was wary, fearful of his wrath. Ashoka's face was taut with earnestness.

Ashoka immediately sent word to the Maharajah that he had arrived and requested an audience with Bindusara. The Maharajah went pale. Here already! Such unflagging energy and driving force never failed to shock him.

'How big is the army that has come along with him from the West?'

The reassuring reply calmed the Maharajah. Twelve heavily armed women from the imperial bodyguard were posted, as a mark of honour and for security, in the reception hall and received the Prince silently and with respect. The encounter was rather reserved.

'My Father, you see that I have carried out your orders immediately.'

'My brave son, you have achieved more in Taxila than I had ever expected and you have matched the wisdom and the maturity of an experienced general. I had perhaps, feared much more severe action on your part. I had not even dared to hope for such wise and successful leadership.'

'I kept strictly to your command which was to quell the uprising in the best way I could. I considered it my prime duty to convince those led astray to be loyal to the Maharajah once again. A strong army would have been needed if punitive action was necessary, now, merely one just commander and a sensible ruler suffices.'

Bindusara understood that Ashoka had disapproved of his decision.

'There is a general feeling here, my son,' he began hesitantly, 'that I gave you and not Sumana the opportunity to prove your capability. And I think it is necessary for my karma and my country to make a decision in accordance with the *Arthashastra*. I wish to give Sumana the opportunity to prove his ability to govern the land that was brought back to peace by you, which now also has an able corps of palace officers ...' Again, he hesitated

a moment. 'I have another assignment for my Ashoka ... The contributions from Ujjain to the treasury have become less and less while their commerce has been expanding. Even the levies on the land have decreased over the last few years. I wish to know the reasons. The people are in need of a capable hand. You can organise the governance as you deem fit. You have showed that your mental abilities are capable of a difficult task such as this. Yours is a task that is more difficult than your brother's. Show once again, in Ujjain, what you are capable of. You will now go as viceroy to the south-western countries of my empire.'

Ashoka bowed deeply towards the Maharajah who, in vain, tried to guess what effect his decision had made on his son.

'You control yourself as behooves a monarch, my Ashoka. Tell me now what you think of this work.'

'I am very happy to acquaint myself with the land where the Maharajah's ships bring goods from distant shores and the people, the city, whose scholars know more than those of Taxila about the movement of heavenly bodies; and to come to know the dark peoples who have been made bereft of their glorious lands along the Indus and the Ganga, and have been driven back from the northern regions; also the people that live in Rajputana, Gujarat and Malwa.'

Bindusara looked at Ashoka in amazement.

'Would my son have preferred to march as the commander of a mighty army against mutinous peoples?'

'My work can only have convinced you that, in my opinion, the power lies with the Maharajah. I wish nothing more than to know your great land, to come to know what forces lie hidden within it and to discover what sets people apart and what binds them. But you have said, my beloved Father, that he who is capable of drawing the bow Gandhiwa and shoot its arrow can govern the empire of Indra. Furthermore, you said that my work in Taxila would be significant for the rest of my life. You will understand that I have been thinking about these words. When I heard that Sumana was to be the viceroy of the Punjab, which I had, in your spirit, restored to obedience and tranquillity to the Maharajah, I believed that my father was dissatisfied with my deeds ... or that a villainous priest had made my work suspicious.'

‘I know everything that has happened in Taxila; I knew what Devaka’s goal was and I was informed of what my reasonable son did against his meddling. However, I do not wish to come in conflict with the Arthashastra. Sumana now has the opportunity to develop his strengths, if he has them. But I shall choose the Crown Prince as my duty to Indra and the other gods and to my people, compels me. Promise me that you will bow to my final decision.’

‘I would not make such a promise, even to Shiva.’

‘So, your self-interests do indeed override your fealty to the Maharajah, my son,’ remarked Bindusara, once again suspecting.

‘I do not wish to make empty, unwise promises that will make it impossible for me to do that which I may deem necessary in the future. In my Father I honour the Maharajah, as long as you remain the Emperor of Aryavarta. Thereafter I will ascertain, according to my own conscience, what the gods wish, what your country demands, and what is necessary for the Mauryas. The harmonious balance of these three concerns will decide my actions. I wish you and this land many more years of governance by Your Majesty. But do you think I would commit your empire into the hands of a clown of the priests? A slave of every beautiful woman? To a worthless non-entity, who places his own needs over and above the larger interests of your empire and its numerous peoples? They are in need of an Emperor with enough insight, willpower and willingness to make necessary sacrifices, by placing his strength and power at the altars of Shiva, Indra and Varuna, instead of sacrificing thousands of animals in the fiery sacred oblations! No god has ever appeared before the people and insisted: tie hundreds, thousands, of animals to poles and tighten the ropes around their innocent necks and deliver me, through Agni, their flesh and blood in heaven. The priests have demanded it! I have seen with my own eyes, how thousands—millions even—beg for support and help, justice, humanity, and a wise governance of the sacred Maharajah, who is sacred for that very reason! And should I then submit if you place Sumana on the ivory throne, my Father? You have forgotten, mighty Emperor, that it is under pressure from the Brahmin ministers, and thus for the Brahmin priests, that you have made Sumana the viceroy of a land that is ill-disposed to the system of varnas, that abhors the holy rites of Madhyadesa; that will never accede to subjugation by the Brahmins’ priestly domination, which Sumana, or rather his advisors, will demand. Forgive me, beloved Father, when I point out

that your decision is a hazardous trial that could pave the way for an even more perilous rebellion than the one I just overcame.'

'Why then did you not oppose it? The Punjab was in your hands, maybe, even a part of my army in Pataliputra. Even help from Iran would not have been out of the question.'

Then it dawned on Ashoka what the real motive of Bindusara's was: fear ... Bimbisara!¹... Silently Ashoka gazed at the Maharajah, always in control of himself, but who now had bared his mind.

'You did think of it, my son!' the Maharajah broke out.

'Of its possibility, certainly, it did lie before me. But never for a moment did I think of carrying it out.'

'Why not?'

'That is farther from what I am, than the throne of Indra, my Father.'

Bindusara remained sunk in his thoughts. Finally, he asked:

'And if I choose Sumana as the Crown Prince?'

'He can only become Maharajah when you are no longer so.'

'So, you deny me my right to appoint the heir to the throne!'

'No, but the right to crown the next Maharajah? Yes. That right belongs only to the divinity who reveals himself in all the people and in whom the divine will is revealed as well. A Maharajah who has chosen an heir, who could prove to be an unmitigated disaster for his lineage and for his country, would draw upon himself the wrath of the most superior deity, of Shiva Himself, as the symbol of life and death. And in this case, I cannot make the promise, my Father, that I would not regard myself as an instrument in His hands, to protect Aryavarta from this calamity.'

Again, Bindusara remained silent for a long time.

'I have not yet made my choice.'

'Sumana is not your choice; neither is he the choice of the Brahmins, but of the Brahmin sacrificial priests of the Brahmin-court. Their preference is not decided by the well-being of your world empire but on their limited views, their lust for power and their greed. They choose Sumana precisely because he will never really be a king. They will give Sumana his wealth, his women, his games, his pleasures, but they will administer the empire only to enforce their views, their will on the people. Do the Mauryas wish that? Or, Chandragupta? Or, Bindusara? I feel as much a Maurya as my two great forefathers. So, I cannot make a pledge, as you ask of me, my Father.'

Bindusara felt abashed.

‘And if I choose you, my son, do you think I will earn Shiva’s approbation?’

Ashoka was surprised, but the Emperor could discern nothing from his face.

‘Do you see any other possibility, great Maharajah?’

‘We shall defer our decisions for the time being: a peacock does not spread his tail until his heart has come completely to rest. Your mother awaits you impatiently, I suspect. Inform me of what you will need for your coming journey and when you will leave.’

Various women from the ladies’ quarters had hurried to Subhadrangi when they heard that Ashoka had returned. Subhadrangi appeared inconsolable.

‘But my dear Subhadrangi,’ said Gopali proudly, ‘it is my son who is Crown Prince! Did you expect it to be any different! Ashoka may be a good commander of the army, but Sumana is destined by the gods and the Brahmins to become the Maharajah and so must first be viceroy. If it were otherwise, if Sumana were to be by-passed, there would be consternation in the whole empire and mutiny would break out. The Brahmins and all the faithful love him for his piety and how he takes joy in life. This is just the way it is.’

‘The way it is, is for the gods to decide,’ said Hara bitinglly.

‘And the holy Maharajah, my dear Hara!’

‘Why do they love him, happy Gopali?’ asked Jalini.

‘Perhaps, because he is proficient in the Vedas,’ said Gopali with a joyful, beaming face.

‘Look, Jalini, a wasp loves the sweet smell of a real flower more than the one in gold, forged in a chakra!’

‘Hara would have preferred Ashoka becoming the Viceroy.’

‘It is not pleasant when a Vaishya raises his cattle only to have the jackals snatch them from the pastures.’

‘There are also gods who receive the cattle as offerings through Agni.’

‘You are right: Indra loves the priests because they prepare soma and sacrificial meats.’

‘No man—much less an Emperor’s son—needs to be ashamed when he enjoys the fruits of the gods.’

‘Do the gods expend time only on delights, my Gopali?’

Just then Ashoka entered the ladies’ quarters.

‘Of course not, Mother Hara. They say that the gods seek strength in the offerings of food and drink to sustain the world. But what kind of deep discussions are being held here? The gods bless you, mother. I have returned from the West.’ Subhadraangi embraced her son and kept silent. No one noticed the sorrow she felt and the difficulty she had in suppressing her tears. Gopali should not know how deeply she had been disappointed. Ashoka greeted the other Ranis with equal warmth.

‘And is Prince Ashoka going to practise for the next military campaign? Or, is he going to rest for a while on the laurels of his victory?’ asked Gopali.

‘Certainly not, most revered mother Gopali. My father, the Maharajah, is sending me as Viceroy to Ujjain. There, too, we hope to persuade the subjects in a peaceable way to be loyal to the laws of the Mighty Emperor. War always has two gloomy companions at his side, mother Gopali: death and pestilence. Peace, however, two good ones: prosperity and happiness. Why should I bring the first ones into my Father’s empire, when the latter are much dearer to us?’

Gopali turned pallid. ‘I heard that Prince Ashoka was such a skilful warrior.’

‘Not me; but if it should ever be necessary, I will take up my chakra. It has proven to be dangerous to be my target.’

‘Ujjain? Where is Ujjain? I have hardly heard of it.’

No one listened to her. Ashoka had to speak of Taxila, Kashmir, the Takkas, the flood, the work he had done. Subhadraangi beamed with joy.

‘Is there an uprising in Ujjain, Prince Ashoka?’

‘No, the Maharajah is sending me there to improve the collection of revenues, mother Hara.’

‘Why does our Lord not send Prince Sumana there? Gopali says that he will become the ruler one day.’

‘A Maharajah does not himself go to the far corners of his country. For that he has his officers, ministers, and army commanders. Maybe, Sumana will become viceroy there when everything has been set right first,’ remarked Gopali.

‘Yes, that would be it,’ mocked Hara. ‘That is what Chandragupta did, as well as Bindusara, the conqueror of enemies. Before their anointment, both Maharajahs always sat in their palaces with their women, played and feasted at Prakriti’s and amused themselves in the park. And when the others had squeezed the mangoes for them, they drank the juice. That befits the Maharajah of a world empire!’

Ashoka found the quarrels among the ladies unpleasant and changed the direction of their conversation. Gopali now left the quarters. Her feeling of being the mother of the next Maharajah faded like the beautiful park in the evening dusk. She knew that keeping up her pride was the right thing to do now. When the others had left the room as well, Subhadra asked:

‘Who will be Crown Prince, my son?’

‘I know as little as you do, my dear mother. The Council wants Sumana and so does the Brahmin-court. Sumana does not have any quality which ensures he will be able to unite an empire of such diverse peoples. The whole West and south-west will be irrevocably lost for the Mauryas. Kullika also thinks so.’

‘Does your Father know this as well as you, my son?’

‘I believe so but I am not certain if the priests will eventually not realise their goal. The older Father gets the less resistance he is able to offer to their unbending will. Sumana’s viceroyalty is their first victory. It is a mystery to me how he will keep peace in the Punjab, unless he takes along a very strong army. And with even that he should not be entrusted. The Maharajah wavers between Maurya and Brahmins, custom and necessity, pressure and duty ... between Sumana and me. If he chooses me, then everything that stands on the side of the priests will be in opposition to me and their influence is no light matter. If he chooses Sumana, then he will have me against him. Not as a power, maybe, but as conscience.’

‘And what do you advise him to do?’

‘I believe that the holy Maharajah is following the right path. It will be a struggle between Sumana and me.’ Hardly audible, Ashoka’s voice came to her ear: ‘Father knows that he should not decide now because the fight between Sumana and me is as inevitable as Surya’s rays in Jyeshtha. Whether he appoints Sumana or me, I will find the Brahmin priests and their inestimable but certainly great power against me. The Maharajah feels the inevitability of it. The struggle of Kshatriyas and Brahmins ... That is

what makes his decisions so wise and unmistakably favourable to me. Only the Punjab! Ujjain attracts me. Taxila has been accomplished, and living here without doing anything, would be impossible for me.'



THE TWO VICEROYS

Subhadrangi was touched.

‘Your Father often spoke to me of your work in Taxila and has said: ‘Ashoka seems to know what is beneficial and good for the Punjab and for the kingdom and he always has the fortitude and the means of carrying it out most efficiently. It is as though the gods have predestined him to be the Emperor.’

The Prince smiled. ‘One who is favoured by the gods is sent sacrificial priests across his path and that ordeal can be beneficial, my dear Mother.’

Early the next morning, Ashoka rode towards the army camp. Sela and his comrades had, with the bright iridescence of their imagination, vividly set forth the deeds of the young commander. Everyone in the West unreservedly felt Ashoka was the very embodiment of Shiva, someone who knew everything and ruled with astonishing divine powers, thus with simplicity. Ashoka’s state-craft was not discernible in the beginning but once it was completed there arose in all the conviction that this is how it ought to be. Eyewitnesses spoke of Gopa’s rescue as divine justice, Virata’s death as nothing short of a miracle, the victory over the Takkas as a revelation, the journey through Udjana, Darada and Kashmir, as a victory-march of Shiva, the alleviation of starvation and procurement of livestock

for the Rajputanas, a wave of his mighty hand. In no time the enthralling tales bloomed into legends among the soldiers.

When Ashoka rode into the camp, he could sense the change in mood: the admiration for the warrior had turned to a soft radiance of religious reverence, a spiritual quivering to which a people born and raised in fear and dependence are easily inclined. He was welcomed as a revered, mighty monarch-to-be. When they brought out his favourite steeds that seemed to joyfully recognise their old friend, the Prince was struck by their gentle loyalty, but the hundreds of watching horsemen by the apparent miracle. And this impression was reinforced by the trumpeting of the elephants when he rode into their compound... When the soldiers had to perform for him, their equestrian exercises, their simulated fights on elephants, their wild races with chariots, displayed their skills with all weaponry, and Ashoka himself joined in the joyous excitement of the contests and games, the earlier attitude of friendship was once again restored. However, Ashoka's appointment as Viceroy and the legends that now surrounded him, somewhat lowered their expressions of joy.

A few days later, while Ashoka was busy teaching his soldiers a new military move that the Syrian envoy had explained as the Greek phalanx, it was reported that the Crown Prince, along with some of his friends, wished to visit the army camp late afternoon.

'The Crown Prince, Sela, the Crown Prince!' A gleam came into his eyes that Sela had not seen before. 'A suit of armour for me, Sela, and have Revata come!'

When Sumana came, Ashoka stood disguised as an ordinary soldier among the others. He had let Revata darken his face and make a few other changes. On the army commander's orders, Sela sent one of Ashoka's favourite elephants to Sumana. His friends followed on horseback.

One of the senior-ranking men had arranged the games, following Ashoka's earlier plans. First, two chariots each spanned by a three-horse team were prepared. Ashoka drove one, and Sela, the other. The soldier in charge had asked two of Sumana's friends, Jokarno and Sahula, to ride with the charioteers. 'Hold on tight!' Ashoka whispered to them. The race was very exciting and both the guest riders had to hang on for dear life to the frame of the chariots; their clothes became so disarrayed and their faces so distraught that the thousands of watching soldiers could barely conceal their glee. No cries of 'Stop!' or curses had any effect on the drivers of the

chariots; they appeared to be totally consumed by the contest. Ashoka won gloriously and brought Jokarno back to the Crown Prince in all earnestness, as Sela did with Sahula. Sumana himself was very amused. In the archery competitions, it was again Ashoka who executed the most difficult shots. A pair of soldiers shot at discs but Ashoka had a senior soldier ask if one of the guests could hold up a mango so that the dark warrior could shoot his arrow through it. No one dared. Then Satna, one of the other archers, held up the fruit laughingly.

In a sudden thirst for sensation, Sumana shouted at Ashoka: 'Shoot that bold bloke right through his heart.' Satna turned ashen. The Wild Prince approached him, pointed to where he wished the arrow to strike, but whispered quickly that he must drop to the ground immediately on Ashoka's whistle, or he could not be saved. He aimed for a moment and then, after a quick signal by whistling, the arrow raced through the air and pierced the tree trunk exactly where Satna's anxious heart had been beating a moment earlier. A loud cheer rent the field.

'Shoot again and this time better!' shouted Sumana angrily. A deathly silence followed.

'Tell Prince Sumana that I cannot kill my comrade, the Maharajah forbids it,' Ashoka told the headman.

'To the elephant camp!' ordered Sumana, enraged. The elephant camp was the Crown Prince's greatest pride.

Ashoka had earlier arranged with the leader that he, with a few select elephants which were very much attached to him and remarkably well-trained, would attack a group of horsemen. He had often practised this with his soldiers. The elephants were lined up in a row, armoured and mounted. A posse of horsemen led by Sela was already approaching in the distance. Suddenly, the Prince signalled with a whistle that the heavy-footed animals knew so well and which set them in motion simultaneously. As the elephants shuffled forwards, Sumana's elephant also began to follow the other elephants, to the great dismay of the onlookers. The animal had recognised the signal and wished to join the others. No matter how the mahout coaxed, the elephant ran onwards in response to the call of the commander. Prince Sumana attempted to hold on tightly even as he kept slipping, first this way, then that. His turban fell off and fluttered onto the field. The faster the animal moved, the more tightly the Prince had to hold on and balance himself on its back. No one dared to laugh and no one was

watching the staged skirmishes anymore; all eyes were on the Prince and his precarious but hilarious situation. They even feared the inexperienced rider would fall off. Ashoka took no heed of Sumana's cries of fear and continued to ride, calling out his battle cry, 'Lamba, Lamba!' and with his whistling urged the animals on. The elephants obeyed without hesitation and sped ahead of the others, towards the horsemen. Sumana had no choice but to follow. The horsemen reined around and fled, and because of their greater speed were able to gain the lead, but Ashoka followed them until they reached the place from where they had started. No one dared cheer the horsemen for fear of offending Prince Sumana.

He yelled hoarsely: 'Seize that oaf and lock him up! He will be executed immediately!'

No one moved.

'Grab the offender of the viceroy of Taxila, you blunderers!'

Then Ashoka went up to him, threw off his soldier's cloak and asked, mockingly:

'Would Prince Sumana prefer to hire Lamba, to execute me?'

Sumana looked at his brother with dazed eyes and gave the order to leave.

'Show your deference to the honoured guests, my soldiers!' ordered the army commander and all bowed deeply before the Crown Prince and his friends, who were rapidly leaving the field. Ashoka looked after them pensively, thinking of Kullika who would surely have discouraged this vengeful exercise with his motto: 'Hate is not cured by hate' But what was it that would make this petty priest's jester realise his own foolishness? What Ashoka felt for his brother was not so much hate as deep disdain.

As evening neared, he galloped back to the city. Halfway there, he was joined by Revata who had silently followed the Crown Prince and his entourage.

'Sire, tonight or before morning, there will be an attack on your life! Prince Sumana returned from the camp enraged. On Jokarno's and Sahula's advice, they held a meeting with Richika. The ministers, Arada and Udra, had also been summoned but showed no desire to be a part of any secret confabulations. Satyavat eavesdropped. They will be conducting a sacrificial ceremony to compel the Gods to bless their efforts at ridding Bindusara's empire of its greatest enemy. Under the command of Jokarno

and Sahula, and with Sumana's help, five very accomplished assassins will inveigle their way into the palace from the park, sneak into your chambers and kill you with sharp poisoned daggers. The priests will, without knowing why, drive the angry spirits from the park with all the powers at their command. Prince Sumana will decoy the guards away from your chamber. Tomorrow all will be over, no one will know the cause of your death, and Sumana will be the undisputed Crown Prince.'

'I shall have my chakras checked and my sword sharpened, Revata.'

'Lord, it would be more prudent to change your sleeping quarters.'

'We shall see, my watchful Revata.'

In front of his palace on the King's Road, Khallataka was waiting for the Prince. Ashoka reined his horse and dismounted, out of respect to the minister. Khallataka invited him very kindly to come in. In a flash, the Prince became suspicious: was this minister also involved in the plot? Were they already trying to lure him into the trap here? To refuse would be a great affront to the senior-most minister. He wanted to avoid that.

'Were you also with Richika today, most honoured Khallataka?'

Khallataka looked at him in surprise.

'Have you already spoken to His gracious Majesty, my Prince?'

'No, I was in the camp the whole day.'

'I wanted to speak to you about that meeting, O, Prince. You must be wary of me. That is why I swear in the name of my all my deceased forefathers, that I am on your side and wish to do everything to prevent an attack on the viceroy of Ujjain. This oath may lack conviction, for there exists something like 'a statement of the gods'¹ ... Khallataka now struck a heavy gong and ordered the servant who presented himself to bring his son, Asvin, before him.

'Swear, Asvin, if your father has ever spoken deceitfully.'

'Never!'

'Swear it on my life.'

'I do not swear on your life, my Father.'

'Prince Ashoka is in grave danger; there is a conspiracy against him! It is no wonder he is even suspicious about your own father.'

Asvin laid his arm around Khallataka's shoulders.

'That is Prince Ashoka's problem, not mine.'

‘Forgive me, Asvin. I was wrong. Will you accompany me to Ujjain after the rains?’

‘No, O, Prince. I will stay with my Father until I finish my studies. I am not a Kshatriya but a Brahmin.’

‘Are you staying because of your father or your studies?’

‘Because of my father.’

Ashoka looked at him questioningly. ‘Don’t you like to study?’

‘Yes, and I greatly love the purohita.’

The Prince now entered the palace without fear, yet on his guard.

‘Your Father, the sacred Maharajah, asks you to be my guest tonight.’

‘My Father? So he knows as well.’

‘The Maharajah always knows everything. His organisation, his knowledge, his respect for the laws and his appreciation of the ministers, make him a great Emperor.’

Ashoka listened to Khallataka in amazement. Then he remarked, icily calm:

‘But my Father often acts against the advice of his ministers.’

‘It is fortunate that he does for he is wiser than all of us and holy.’

Again, Ashoka was suspicious. Why was his father praised by the Minister, since—where Ashoka was concerned—they had opposed him vehemently and persistently in all things! Was this yet a trap? Had the conspirators, in a lucid moment, made changes? Was it that the park and palace were too heavily guarded? Would his innate respect for the noble advisors of his father deliver him into the hands of his enemies? ‘Protect yourself first, that is your most important duty.’ And here he was entrusting himself, unprotected, to his very enemies!

‘My Father’s most honoured and senior-most minister will have to excuse me if this ‘fortunate’ sounds strange to me. It is contrary to the attitude of the Ministers’ Council, including the principal Minister, concerning my appointment as the commander of the army and Prince Sumana’s as the viceroy of Panchanada, the kingdom that I brought to peace. When a tiger remarks to a deer: your father was a keen deer, because he has managed to stay out of the reach of my claws, he is not yet safe from the king of the jungle.’

‘You forget, O, Prince, that the viceroy of Ujjain usually becomes the Maharajah.’

‘That still does not mean that the Ministers’ Council wants him on the throne.’

‘You, whose astuteness approaches that of your great father’s, are right, O Prince. The Ministers’ Council does not want you, I do. Till recently, I have been under the belief that the Maharajah chose you out of fear, fear of your vigour ... and your wild warrior’s heart ... And till a few days ago, I was under the impression that Prince Sumana conformed to the wishes and thinking of the Brahmins out of respect, out of his refinement and wise insight, until I saw unmistakable proof of his rudeness and derision of all that a man of honour holds sacred. Your father placed me—probably on purpose—in frequent touch with the Taxilan, Vimalamitra. He was my guest. I now acknowledge fully your innate wisdom. Prince Sumana forgot himself so much in an excitable moment that he threw his gauntlet in my face! At me, the senior-most minister of the Maharajah of Aryavarta, a grave insult in itself; however, after this act, instead of being apologetic, he laughed derisively. Do you think, O, Prince, that an Aryan of one of the most prominent families of Magadha, one in whose blood is not a trace of slavery, would ever condone that? Before this incident I had thought that his inherent sense of refinement and competence were being misjudged. I have now brought an offering of thanksgiving for the gods, for having cleared my mind. Nature should have taught me that there are fruits whose peels are coarse but whose juice is delicious and there are fruits whose outer peel is brilliant but its kernel is as bitter as gall.’

‘Very flattering, honoured Khallataka. However, the Maharajah taught me to be cautious in each and every task.’

‘Tiger and antelope ... Yes, O, Prince. I wish to safeguard you from some uncouth young hot-heads whose deficiency in inner values they hope to replace with brute force. Go to your Father. Ask him what he wants.’

‘I have great confidence in you, my highly honoured Khallataka. Prudence demands I honour your request.’

‘Do you want to take any weapons along?’

‘My chakra is unfailing, my sword sharp and consecrated in Shiva’s service.’

Ashoka had himself announced to the Maharajah.

‘You here, my son? Khallataka is responsible for your safety. You know, do you not, what has been decided regarding the viceroy of Ujjain!’

‘Of course. That is why I did not trust Khallataka either. But you, my Father, how do you know?’

‘Nothing of any importance happens here in Pataliputra that I do not know about. Could I maintain a Court of Thousands of Brahmins and not know how they live, care for my family and not oversee their deeds! To my regret, the rash young men will have to discover that my will reigns in my kingdom. Sumana will come to know that he is playing a dangerous game.’

‘Perhaps, my vengeance over his earlier attack brought on his anger.’

‘One, who wishes to become the Maharajah must attempt to develop his powers of reasoning and enhance his wisdom, while taming his anger. If he sees his brother as an adversary then he can show his goodwill by trying to equal or outdo him in the administration of a kingdom. Death is used only as the last measure: if the law is violated, or chaos stalks the empire, or the will of the almighty Maharajah is enfeebled; otherwise it means rebellion. No one would dare kill a Brahmin! But would they make an attempt on the life of a son of my house? By hired assassins? For such a senseless deed more manas is needed, than my oldest son, his comrades and the Brahmin-court collectively possess. Now that the conspirators have involved my palace directly in their crime, I shall have to judge them myself. Stay with Khallataka tonight and try to reach his house without being noticed. I wish to catch them in the act.’

The ‘purification’ of the park by the priests, the changing of the guards, the luring away of the female guards in the vicinity of Ashoka’s chamber at night, was executed so easily that any conspirator, sharper than Sumana and his friends, would have become suspicious. Without any great difficulty the figures sneaked through to the sleeping quarters where they hoped to discover Ashoka, the Prince whom they hated so much. The door closed behind them and then, unnoticed by them, another door opened and the light of several lamps which were being carried in, illuminated a stage that stopped the conspirators short in horror. The Maharajah sat enthroned on a high seat with two judges beside him. Twelve heavily armed female palace guards encircled them. The assassins threw up their hands and fell to their knees, bowing deeply to the ground.

‘Stand up, you blackguards! What are you doing here? In a part of the palace where no outsider can enter without my seal of approval! Show me my seal! You do not have it? Then you will pay with your lives! What was it you decided this afternoon in the Brahmin-court, Jokarno and Sahula?’

There was no reply.

‘You do not reply! What did you plan in the viceroy of Taxila’s presence?’

Still no reply came.

‘Would you like to postpone your answer till I have brought in the rack? Wherefore did you hire these people? Why are they carrying their daggers, even poisoned ones, hidden under their clothes! Answer!’

‘To kill Prince Ashoka, all-knowing Maharajah.’

‘My son! The Viceroy of Ujjain! And in my palace! I ought to laugh at your infantile sport, Jokarno and Sahula, if you had not insulted the reigning Maharajah of Aryavarta so deeply. Do any of the judges wish to ask any other questions of these fools? No one? There is but one fitting punishment for this crime: You are condemned to death, all of you, and the sentence will be carried out immediately.’

‘Sire,’ began Jokarno, ‘Prince Ashoka had us ...’

‘Silence, I know the circumstances better than you do.’

When the female guards had carried out the orders of the Maharajah, Prince Sumana was summoned to Ashoka’s quarters. He did not understand what his friends wanted of him and how they could dare! After all, he was supposed to have been kept out of the whole affair. Or, ... Mortal fear then came over him when he entered the room. He looked at the condemned corpses in horror. Then his eyes travelled to the Maharajah ... the judges, the guards. Trembling, he bowed before his Father. No one spoke a word. All eyes were on the Prince. Breaking the ghastly spell, he stammered, hardly audible:

‘Father, I am ... surprised.’

‘You are surprised, Sumana! Had you expected something different, viceroy of Taxila?’

‘Father, my Father ... not I ...’

‘No, no, imagine: a murderer on the throne of Taxila! You will not leave before the monsoon. So, you will prepare yourself for your work in these months. I shall appoint your gurus. You will no longer leave the park and the palace without my explicit permission. Now, return to your chambers.’

Bindusara considered whether to call in the Brahmin priests who had been at the meeting. He felt that it would be better to send only for Richika. When the head of the Brahmin-court had somewhat recovered from his

shock, he regained his arrogant attitude, all the while averting his eyes in horror from the dead bodies.

‘You were the head of a meeting this afternoon, Richika.’ The priest blanched. ‘A very important one that involved my house!’

‘Yes, merciful Maharajah.’

‘You considered it not worthy to keep me abreast of this meeting, head of the Brahmin-court, even though it was your duty to do so as required by the oath.’

‘That is still possible, merciful Majesty.’

‘Now, when it could have been too late? You know, Richika, that you owe your life for that omission.’ Richika bowed as the Maharajah continued. ‘Even though you are a Brahmin. Do you wish to say anything else in your defense?’

‘Sire, the gods wanted Ashoka’s death.’

‘And mine as well? And how many other Mauryas could expect a sentence of death from Richika and the gods? Is this the reason the Mauryas maintain a Brahmin-court? Early tomorrow morning, you— along with the priests Tristus and Sunasepha who were also present at the meeting—will leave for the jungle of Mithila beyond the Ganga. You shall never come back to Pataliputra nor to Magadha. Any further insurrection against my will or on my sentence, which covers your whole life, or another attack on any member of the royal household will incur as its consequence the severest punishment and would have you outlawed. Do any of the judges wish to say anything?’

Everyone kept silent. ‘Go, Richika!’

The priest bowed and left the palace.

Khallataka and Ashoka discussed the nature of their relationship. In each of them was the sincere and strong desire to get to know the leading principle of the other one’s aspirations.

‘If you, as the viceroy of Ujjain, could revere the Brahmin priests, perceive their offerings as indispensable, recognise their religious rubrics, then probably few would object to your accession to the throne. It would be politically in accordance with the 13th Prakarna of the Arthashastra.’

‘How can I value people who coerce others to accept that their will is the will of the gods; who consider their sacrificial rites and ceremonies as

indispensable, when all they do is rob the good, honest Vaishyas of their properties. Or, how acknowledge their religious canons which are in stark contrast to everything that great and deep thinkers have learned by distilling the truth from their true inner-self, that is part of the great Atman. Why do they curse the lands on the other side of the Sarasvati? Because the people there do not wish to yield to their priestly laws! Is Vimalamitra a person to be cursed? I have met many men such as him in the West. Are they more contemptible than we in Madhyadesa? The sacrificial priests themselves are responsible for the growing contempt that more and more peoples have for their class! People are beginning to realise that the rains come for those who have made sacrifices with the help of priests as well as for those who do not seek a priest's aid, that the fruit of those who do not make sacrificial oblations, grows just as well as for those who do. Do you approve of the great mass of hardworking Vaishyas, being instructed by heartless priests to snuff out the life of their favourite animals; to offer their hard-won riches and their best cows to men who often do less good for their karma than the cattle they garner undisturbed? Is it then any wonder that the Brahmins who swagger from one soma-inebriated animal sacrifice to another only to fill their bellies are mocked so? While they who make the offerings look up with reverence to the gods, the Brahmin guests hold vulgar discussions with each other because they themselves have no belief in it and are so insolent as to not even remain silent for the Vaishyas. Ask Sayana what he thinks of the sacrifices!'

'Sayana does not oppose them because the people want and ask for them.'

'How can he, a Brahmin, judge as a necessity what is a lie! Sayana scorns them in his heart because he is a great human being, a true Brahmin.'

'But the empire is sustained by the people, the people by the priests, and the peace of the empire by the offerings.'

'Until the priests themselves have made the offering contemptible.'

'The Vaishyas cannot live without their priests.'

'That feeling is exploited by the priests. In a single sacrifice, I have seen half the possessions of a Vaishya, appropriated by the bramacharins.'

'Maharajah Bindusara recognises them too and considers them to be necessary to keep the masses compliant and content.'

‘The understanding of each ruler will not be similar to the one before, and in any case it need not be similar for a section of the subjects who merely wish to serve their own interests.’

‘How would you prevail upon the gods to favour you, O, Prince?’

‘Now it is for sale, and the priests determine the market price, my most honoured Khallataka.’

‘But the people perform their duties to the Maharajah as well, and they live humble and well, and happily.’

‘Not happily. Because of the many rites and rituals, the life of the faithful is one of continuous pain and fear. They fear they will receive the most extreme and disproportionate of punishments for the smallest infringement on laws, and mantras and offerings make their lives one of unbearable affliction. During their entire lives, anxiousness, fear and punishment, drive them on to the paths of the priests and it is all to the advantage of the priests!’

‘Do you think it better then that the people indulge in joy and in pleasures, in laziness, play and adultery, like a certain band of pleasure-lovers?’

‘No. Their religion must not promote their fears but their happiness, not their greed but their humane feelings, not their harshness to sacrificial animals but love for their fellow-creatures who are a part of the same Atman as they.’

‘That is not a task for a human being, but for a god.’

‘I never saw the gods appearing to punish greedy priests or soften the sufferings of the squeezed-out Vaishyas. And the Maharajah ... can he hoard his riches so that he can wallow in luxury? He must rule his great empire, which is his only as long as he is the Maharajah. If he rules poorly, then his store of karma is depleted, his people unhappy, his empire in unrest ... Submission to the sacrificial priests prevents every king from being a supreme monarch. The Maharajah of Aryavarta rules the East and the West, the tribes in the mountains of the Hymavant, and the dark peoples behind the Vindhyas. How can he honour priestly laws which curse one-half of the population and glorify another? The wise Sayana says that each person is a part of the great Atman: *Tat Tvam Asi*. But then the king is as much a fragment of the same spirit as any of his subjects, and he is then: spirit of their spirit, is their spirit; life of their life, is their life; and his power has

sprung from the same source as their life's energy. He must be in the service of their well-being, which is but the well-being of the Atman, and not of the domineering and avaricious faction that places itself above the Shudra, the Vaishya, the Kshatriya, even above the King, maybe even above the gods. I will never agree with that, my honoured Khallataka. To the Maharajah, one man's need of care is as great as another's; one who suffers has need of his comfort. He who is happy has to share his happiness. If you wish to help me with that, then you are my friend; if you help him who would be a disaster for Aryavarta, O, Khallataka, then you are my enemy. Another choice does not exist.'

The minister felt he had been defeated. Thoughts that often visited him but which he had dismissed as being unrealistic or beyond reach, were now, after Ashoka's clear proposition, like a glorious vision. Maybe, it could be attained through the sheer will of the young King, albeit after a hard struggle. And then—Ashoka was right—there was no choice.

'He who has arrived at such ideals is a god, he who strives for them, is my friend, O, Prince.'

'I bow before your exalted spirit that dares to confront the difficult task of carrying out these ideas, revered Khallataka. Experience has taught me that it is not easy to be my friend.'

After Ashoka had left to rest, Khallataka remained in deep thought for a long time. He felt happy that his feelings were no longer vengeful towards Sumana, but were one with the lofty flight of Ashoka's thinking, with his ethos of work and forceful will. No ... it was certainly not easy!



THE SAGE IN THE HERMITAGE

‘What is my son thinking of doing now?’ asked Bindusara. ‘I would dearly love to go to Kullika. I miss him very much. But I see no way of reaching him before the monsoon. Do I have your consent to seek Sayana’s hospitality during the rainy season?’

Bindusara was happier than he appeared. He would now know with absolute certainty of the actions, the desires and the will of his strong son.

‘Good, but let your visit be a secret. Punishment like the one meted out by me yesterday very seldom attains its goal. Sayana will give you another identity during your stay across the Ganga. That will be safer.’

Sayana received the Prince with warmth. He, too, wanted to dispel all doubts about the motivations of the young viceroy who was so often the subject of their deliberations.

‘And what did Prince Ashoka learn in the West?’

Ashoka had to ponder for a moment. After some hesitation, he said: ‘That people are ruled not by fate, nor priestly will, nor the magic incantations of the *Atharva Veda*, maybe not even by the will of the gods.’

‘Then by what, my wise Prince?’

‘A web, spun into chaos, into maya, of cause and effect. Like the jungle, where sun and water thrust millions of trees upwards, entwined inextricably

by the climbing and twisting creepers, with flowers and shrubs growing into a living, life-giving world in which countless animals crawl, climb or fly. A world where there is no beginning and no end, so it seems, no turning back or going forward but where the tiniest of flies and the biggest of elephants find their causal beginning and inevitable end. The forest giant, like the little moss, germinates and dies from cause and effect. That is what I have learned, Lord.'

'And what else have you learned, my Prince?'

'That it is wiser to conduct people and animals towards peace and benevolence with justice, tolerance and love, than with the sword, the bow and the arrow.'

'And what more did you learn, my Prince.'

'That selfishness and deceit lead to destruction and ruin, thus to maya, and self-sacrifice and love to truth and harmony, thus to divine unity.'

'Then you have learned more in one year than many of us do in a whole life, Piyadasi¹. You will have this name as long as you are my guest.'

'Kullika was my guru, Lord.'

'Kullika says that you reflect on everything yourself and merely go to him to endorse your own truths.'

'That is because Kullika's most glorious virtue is his modesty, honourable Sayana.' Sayana thought about the sundry times when Kullika had approached him in desperation, seeking answers to Ashoka's questions that flourished in his agile mind like lotus buds in the sacred pond.

'But why then do you worship Shiva, the Lord of life and death, when worldly events are based on cause and effect just as the Buddha taught, my Piyadasi?'

'I worship Shiva, especially when I think that my decision is the inevitable effect of preceding causes. Shiva is the embodiment of cause and effect: cause of life out of death, and death out of life, of wisdom out of knowledge and knowledge out of wisdom; his thought, his meditation, holds the world together, the world creates new thought, and the thought returns to the cosmic thought: *Tat Tvam Asi* ... Shiva is for me the binding, the uniting power. Without that, the world would disintegrate into chaos.'

Piyadasi slept that night on a hard floor and rose before the sun, so that he could fulfil his morning worship by contemplating in the hermitage on his life, in peace and in silence, in work and in thought. He joined the

brahmacharins as they built and lit the offering fire, cleaned the pots, milked the cows, tended to the animals and made ghee from butter. He walked with them through the pastures, or rested with them under a banyan tree in the yellowing fields. Then, he told about the slaying of a beautiful daughter of a king, of famine endured by the Rajputanas, in the great land across the Sarasvati, until he had the brahmacharins shuddering. They regarded the tales told by this stranger as fantasies, but felt some mysterious aura surrounding this knowledgeable youth, as mysterious as the myths of the Vedas. When Surya neared the horizon and an undisturbed calm surrounded the hermitage, much like the quiet dew does the lotus pond, Piyadasi would walk over to the verandah where Sayana was seated, poring over ancient, dusty manuscripts. He would remain silent till the friendly Brahmin put them aside.

‘Does Piyadasi like the hermitage?’

‘Master, the sannyasin who has passed through the four stages of life and, liberated from the world’s maya, enters the glorious fullness of heaven, cannot feel more happiness flow through his soul than I, amidst the tranquillity and truth within your hermitage.’

‘Fine, my Piyadasi ... You learned that people and animals should be guided to peace and kindness not with the sword or the bow and arrow, but with justice, tolerance and love. Yet, you killed Virata with your chakra.’

‘Virata was a sacrifice to Shiva. Virata was a human being with a will of his own, who did not accept the Maharajah, who trifled with the lives of the inhabitants of Taxila. All this aroused Shiva’s wrath, who demanded Virata’s life as divine justice.’

‘But not through love and human tolerance.’

‘Yes, for love and tolerance for the peoples in the West. My Father granted me supreme power. There was but one choice: sacrifice Virata to Shiva or the mutinous people. I chose Virata.’

‘But then you can choose any minister, any Brahmin, even the Maharajah as a sacrifice.’

‘No, he is the supreme judge and lord; I am merely his son and servant. My power does not extend any further than his command. Any step that is taken beyond this clear-cut road would be for me a rebellion against the sanctity of the divine universal spirit.’

‘And if your brother Sumana were to be anointed as the Maharajah?’

‘He, who twice tried to have me killed by assassins? He will not be, as long as I live.’

‘You may face serious opposition on your way.’

‘No sacrifice can be too great. Not even my life!’

‘Through justice with the sword, the bow and arrow or through compassion and love?’

Ashoka was shaken by these thoughts, but his face remained calm.

‘I will make that choice when the inevitable battle confronts me. Tell me, my Sayana, whether Shiva will tolerate one who is a slave to his pleasures and of the priests, becoming the Maharajah.’

‘Remember well, O, Piyadasi, that even the mightiest man does not lead himself, but is led. A man is not God but an insignificant unravelling of the All-Spirit and thus is united with all.’

A few days later the monsoon set in with tremendous storms, thunder and cloud bursts. The Ganga and its tributaries rose with each passing day. Ashoka found himself in the fields with some of Sayana’s pupils. The rising water isolated two cows on a piece of high ground. With great effort they managed to reach the animals and drive them through the water, tied to each other with ropes. Along the way, one of the animals got entangled in the ropes at the deepest part of the river. Ashoka, who always carried his chakras with him, did not think twice, swam to the animal and cut the rope. He was then, along with the cow, pulled along by the current. Ashoka drifted off with the obdurate animal. The others heard how he called the drifting animal towards him. Then both were lost from sight upon a curve in the river.

Sayana was worried. Revata, who had just arrived to bring news of Pataliputra to Ashoka, reassured him:

‘There is no danger, holy Sayana. The Prince is verily Shiva himself.’

Sayana did not respond but was joyous when Ashoka did indeed return to the hermitage, unharmed.

‘Do not risk your life again for one of my animals, my Piyadasi!’

‘I did not take the risk for the sake of the animals but for the sake of a life that was entrusted to us by you, holy Sayana.’ Sayana was touched but remained silent.

Revata informed Ashoka that Prince Sumana had paid a visit to the camp of the soldiers several times and that he, at the urging of his mother

Gopali, had treated the soldiers to liquor and cakes. He offered expensive prizes for games and gambling with dice.

‘Let him,’ said Ashoka.

‘Sela fears that there could be a change in the mood of the army because of this.’

Sayana listened intently.

‘Let the tipplers and the gamblers stay by his side and later go along with him to Taxila. Then only my friends will remain in Pataliputra. I prefer that. What do you think, honourable Sayana?’

‘You are right. Let the legends that have been woven around you keep on working. By his very actions, Prince Sumana prevents the people from seeing in him more than a squandering son of a king.’

‘Sire, I met up with Shakuni when I was wandering around Pataliputra, disguised as a yogi. He is still with Devaka and every now and then goes on errands to the Brahmin-court. Richika, Tristus and Sunasepha are staying together in the same hermitage. Shakuni’s route was not far from this hermitage.’

‘Can you not go to Devaka as well?’

‘Sire, I deserted Devaka in Kashmir and testified against him in Pataliputra, two mistakes for a good informant.’

‘A man without faults is a god, Revata. Disguise yourself. It is of great importance for me to know what the Brahmin-court is up to.’

‘Sire, I shall do as you desire. I brought you my mongoose, the monsoon often drives the dangerous snakes to higher places, perhaps also to this hermitage. I locked him in your room.’

Despite the rains, Revata left for the mountains.

‘Who is this Revata?’ asked Sayana.

‘He protected me from a fatal fall and is my best informant; he has an infallible memory, can disguise his voice as he wants, camouflage himself so that he is unrecognisable and is one of the best healers I know.’

‘So, a Shudra.’

‘Yes. While in Taxila, where he performed many invaluable services for me as an informer, he studied with great devotion the healing arts.’

‘The other day you said: selfishness leads to destruction, self-sacrifice and love to harmony, and so to divine unity. Is your own desire not self-serving, lacking sacrifice and love for Sumana?’

‘My desire for sacrifice and love are not directed to one sole individual and especially not Sumana! Only for my father the Maharajah, and his peoples! Father is the supreme power, the supreme will. After he is gone, justice must still prevail and then, perhaps, self-sacrifice and love to achieve divine unity and harmony, which today is as far from Magadha and Madhyadesa as is the throne of Brahma.’

‘You are supportive of teachings that proclaim that nothing ever happens in this world that is not due to cause and effect and yet you worship gods who are said to influence this law in all sorts of ways ...

You state that it is better to lead people to peace and kindness through justice and tolerance and love but you are prepared to wage a hard battle, a merciless one if necessary, with weapons in hand, when the Maharajah dies ...

You have learned that selfishness and deceit lead to destruction, self-sacrifice and love to truth and harmony, to divine unity. But are you yourself free of self-interest and lies? Are you not sending Revata to your enemies with a lie?’

Ashoka looked for a long time at the Guru.

‘All that you have learned, my Piyadasi, is beautiful but what is a beautiful flower which does not bear seed, a tall tree that gives no shade; what is a mountain from which no water flows, a sacred law which is not obeyed; what is a beautiful doctrine which is only debated but not served from the heart!’

‘Yes, yes, my wise Sayana!’

‘What is the point of killing a tiger with a fire, to save the lives of animals and people, if that fire spreads through the jungle and destroys more animals and people? What purpose is served by pouring the waters of the oceans over a desert, if that water does not have power to give life and provides no relief from thirst? One who accepts the doctrine, fears no tiger, no hunger, because the doctrine itself surpasses life and death.’

‘Yes, yes, my Sayana.’

‘The Yogi, who recognises that to attain nirvana he must subjugate every desire in his body, his own ‘I’, thus all maya, curbs those desires with the five holy fires, blinds himself with the overpowering light of Surya’s eye, stretches his arms to the heavens so far that they become stiff and never bend down towards the earth. He shies away from nothing, to serve

his doctrine, my Piyadasi. The Jain eats no meat, kills no animals, even when they bait and threaten him, he runs water through a sieve so he may not destroy any life, sweeps the road before him meticulously with a palm branch, as he walks, out of fear of trampling upon life. His life is one of painstaking care to serve the doctrine of ahimsa.'

'Yes, yes!'

'Prince Vessantara practised benevolence. A cruel Brahmin demanded his property, later his children, his wife, everything. He served the doctrine of benevolence to the very core till he was left with nothing.'

'Yes, yes, my wise Sayana.' Ashoka then sat silent and pondering with his old friend for a long time.

'If it is alright with you, I will go now and rest, great Sayana.'

Sayana gestured benignly, looked on after Ashoka, until he disappeared into the hermitage. He understood he had stuck a knife into living flesh.

Sayana rarely saw Piyadasi in the ensuing few days. The Prince spoke hardly a word, did not answer when he was asked something, stared for hours on end at the rain pouring down on Magadha. One brahmacharin thought Piyadasi was homesick; he had not even helped light fires for a few mornings; another thought Piyadasi was proud and looked down on his fellow-pupils, not joining them when they went to the woods to gather roots and fruit; a third, Matali, thought that perhaps Piyadasi might become mad and ought to be feared. Sayana smiled.

'Piyadasi is very dear to me, so serve him as you would serve me, my good brahmacharins.'

Finally, one evening, Ashoka walked up to Sayana, greeted him respectfully and sat down next to him. Instantly, the Brahmin laid aside his sacred scriptures because he knew that Piyadasi had attained clarity by himself.

The young Prince had been so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he immediately resumed their unfinished conversation from a few days earlier:

'A doctrine, my noble Sayana, one embraces for the wisdom it contains, for the great happiness it gives its servant, for the divine unity that it unveils from maya, for the desire for the good that it ignites in the searching soul... for all these treasures one serves it ...

But he who serves the doctrine for the sake of the doctrine, kills the tiger for the sake of killing; kills desires just to kill; stretches his arms or

blinds his eyes, for that sake alone; or spares lives, merely for the sake of ahimsa ...

Who, my wise Sayana, can be captivated by a flower whose colours and beauty lie obscured in the depth of a jungle night, which promises honey but has none, which promises its fruits to the sannyasin but decays fruitless? A flower is not enchanting for its own sake but because of its beauty and the precious treasures it offers to those who can see it and love it. Who can be touched by a sacrifice which merely provides the priests with riches, soma and meat? A sacrifice consoles not because of the offering, holy Sayana, but because of the unshakeable faith in the divinity of the one great, eternal God.

Who can be entranced by the sun whose rays scorch the deserts of Rajasthan²? The sun does not entrance because it is the sun but because of its light, its nourishing power over nature.

Who is charmed by the gemstones which lie hidden in the dark caverns of treasuries? Gemstones are not beguiling for their own sake but for the beauty that glows from them, caressing the eyes with their silky softness ...

The doctrine has to be the good friend, honourable Sayana, which supports, holds out a helping hand, and is not angered when one offends it. It cannot be a tyrant who demands foolish and thoughtless ceremonies and offering fires, nor can it be the fires which consume the fine treasures it hides within.

One who serves the doctrine for the sake of the doctrine, dies before his death.'

Sayana sought for nothing more and blessed his young friend.

Sayana was surprised at how, on his own, the young Prince searched for truth; how he was ready to accept all the consequences. The wise Brahmin had known for a long time why this young person, hungry for truth and harmony, had sounded out the scholars of Taxila about the many schools and social systems which stirred the minds of India. He spoke at length with Sayana, too, about the religions that divided his father's empire, about the two great opposites: 'He, who wants the truth, seeks the truth and finds many truths' ... Buddhism, and 'the only truth is the revealed truth of the Vedas' ... Brahmanism. He himself had tried to guide the spiritual growth of this strong son of the Mauryas. But he soon realised that Ashoka explored the truth by himself, because of his unquenchable desire for the

truth, and that because of this the relationship between him and the priests grew more tense, and that his criticism did not spare the mighty priesthood.

One evening, Ashoka sat alone on the verandah with his old friend. The rain had stopped and the waning moon cast its dim light on the woods and the grounds. A kokila, the Indian nightingale, poured out its clear songs into the peaceful evening. Ashoka listened.

‘Wonderful, that carefree, sparkling happiness! Why must people go through life in fear, envy, and cheerlessness? Brahmanism is conducting the peoples of Aryavarta to their downfall, my Sayana.’

‘Who guided you along your path of thinking, my Piyadasi?’

‘Kullika ... Vimalamitra, Vasudeva ... Sayana ...’

‘All of them are faithful Brahmins.’

‘You are right, Brahmanism has two faces: the one of my highly revered friends who are purified and ennobled by it, and the other, the one that weighs on the souls of the Aryans like a nightmare.’

‘Is it wrong that a young Aryan, a brahmacharin, learns the Vedas to the letter and when he grows older, as a grihastha, head of a household, applies it to his life? If he increases his power of mind, he can interpret them spiritually as a vanaprastha, a hermit, and then, finally, as a sannyasin, end free of thought. The empire benefits from this and falls by this. They are the four phases for each who is twice born.³’

‘But, honourable Sayana, the system is being undermined by the representatives themselves, like the glacier dam by Devaka. By far a majority of people are Shudras and peoples from the accursed West, Mlecchas: are they not also the revelation of the Atman, just like you or me?’

‘Coarseness and false religious principles of the primitive peoples must be kept out of our social structure! They can still retain their traditions.’

‘And the Shakyamuni, a Kshatriya, a Raja, Buddha!’

‘What he preached ... so does Brahmanism. His religion groups things differently, he teaches us a few new things for practical use. But what is threatening is that he is shaking the foundations of Aryavarta!’

‘Then make these foundations more solid, truer, more humane!’

‘That possibility cannot be relied upon.’

‘Knowledge, truth, insight?.’

‘Knowledge is merely for the gifted few. And truth ... he who seeks truth, finds many truths. Look around you, how the small sect of Buddhism is now breaking up more and more into even smaller sects, all of whom claim to have found the truth.’

‘But should not there be one essential truth, to be known, to be established?’

‘We have that one truth in our four stages of life. What does the form matter! When you say: ‘sacrifices please the gods’, a brahmacharin will think of the offering fire, a simple Vaishya of the material offering; the vanaprashtha will think of the spiritual offering, the symbol, the recognition of the embodiment of ‘good’ in the godhead; and for the sannyasin it will be his freedom from thoughts. But all four express one and the same truth in the offering: the intrinsic connection to the loftiness of the Atman. How would you keep your one essential and established truth, meant for all, free from rituals involving snakes, or fetish worshipping, tree adoration and the more loathsome idolatries of the Mlecchas?’

‘Gautama Buddha had more faith in the human being, in the non-Aryan. Every human being can walk the sacred eightfold path if he treads the sacred path in faith and if he is touched in his soul by the right way of life that opens the gates to the path! To lead a whole people to faith and the right way of life, the *sila* ...’

‘Everything will crash, my young thinker, against the high rocks of Brahmanism. The greedy priest cannot be banished because man himself is greedy. Buddhism has no revealed Vedas. That is why it will be divided, again and again.’

‘But now the sacrificial priest symbolises the pinnacle of greed. That is why he ruins the empire and its subjects. Moreover, Brahmanism has its divisions, too.’

‘In the schools, the hermitages, yes! But there it is not divisive, as it is cloistered, and it is there that rejuvenation must take place, when needed ... the Upanishads. But who should bring the blessings of the Buddha to the many and diverse peoples of the Maharajah?’

‘The Maharajah!’

Sayana saw how this pure young man struggled with his inner quest for truth and justice. His striving for the ivory throne was not motivated by a thirst for power but from a clear insight that had sprung within him about

the relationships within the great empire, which drove and urged him, relentlessly, towards power. Would this power in his hands bloom like the luxuriant growth in Vasantha ... or would it scorch the lands like the summer sun in Jyeshtha? What could serve as his fertile soil? Was he the one to show him the way? Sayana felt himself a Brahmin ... Buddhism? Scoffed at, cursed within his varna; at the very least, a menace in the wrong hands! And yet, did not the flooding by the rivers make fertile fields of the desert? Was not a burnt jungle a valuable pasture for the most beautiful livestock? Brahmin with Chandala! In Aryavarta ... India ... *Tat Tvam Asi*.

‘Gautama Shakyamuni’s influence would then be far reaching, Piyadasi! Too far for a small, decaying Brahmin sect that even in its early youth did not develop fresh spirit and unity.’

‘Every great banyan tree was once an insignificant seed, a timid little plant, that later in its deep shadow would smother every other plant spread under its vast expanse. Give it air, rain sun, my Sayana.’

‘Does my young friend feel himself being drawn to the Buddha?’

‘I seek ... for my people for a religion that will not call my faithful Revata ‘an animal in human form’, or label one part of Aryavarta as blessed and the other as accursed or divide humanity into blessed and accursed souls ... Knowing myself, I could never tolerate that. It is all a lie! What will bring an end to that, my wise Sayana? What? What?’

Sayana nodded. No more guiding now!

‘What would you wish, my Piyadasi?’

‘Wish? Wish! I? ... Shiva! But Shiva in the hands of the sacrificial priests becomes the god of death and terror!’

Sayana was reminded of what Kullika had told him about Ashoka on the ‘Barren Mountain’ ... Embodiment of Shiva? He would find his own path without Sayana!⁴ ...



THE GODS REQUIRE A SACRIFICE

Disguised as a vanaprasthi, Revata came to Richika's hermitage, seeking shelter. Devaka, who was now staying with the three exiled priests, failed to recognise him, but distrusted him nonetheless. Though they appeared to take Revata into their confidence they never spoke about the capital or of its inhabitants in his presence. Shakuni had heard in Pataliputra that Prince Ashoka had left the city, had looked for and secretly followed him. He found out that the Prince was staying with Sayana. Sayana's brahmacharins were not completely free of jealousy of Piyadasi and so it was not difficult for Shakuni to find out what he wanted to know. The sacrificial priests deliberated at length on how they would take revenge on the one who was responsible for their calamitous situation. They would do nothing themselves! Look for a fanatic, capable enough, to carry out their plans. They deflected Revata's inquisitiveness with their life of strict penance, to cleanse themselves—so they said—of past sins, by constant prayers, baths, practising breathing exercises, drinking of hot water and hot milk and smearing their bodies with cow-dung¹. The Brahmins were since long regarded as holy in their neighbourhood and thus feared.

In the meantime, Devaka chanced upon a Vaishya, Hasta, who had unintentionally killed a cow. As penance he was instructed by a priest to live literally the life of a cow, wrapping himself in the skin of the cow. He

had to live on the ‘murdered’ cow’s last grazing field for three months; he was not allowed to shelter himself against the weather, had to protect the other livestock from predators and thieves, and welcome the cows everyday, treating them respectfully, all the while strictly observing a fast. Thus had it been decreed by Manu. Devaka found him sitting shrivelled in the dirty hide, inconsolable, exhausted, wasting away. The canny priest, after having patiently listened to Hasta’s story, kept returning to the poor Vaishya and spoke to him ... This sinner was just the man!

‘You can be absolved of your sins and take care of your well-being in another way.’

‘How, Lord?’

‘Well, by saving the life of a Brahmin. Then you will be reborn as a Brahmin. If you save many Brahmins, then your welfare will be multiplied.’

‘Lord, this is foolishness. I do not know of any Brahmins being in danger! How then can I save them?’

‘Come to our hermitage tomorrow.’

‘I am not permitted to leave the pastures, Lord.’

‘Four Brahmins are expecting you.’

After careful planning, Hasta was told, when he came to the hermitage on the following day, that in Sayana’s hermitage which was not far from the Ganga, was staying a brahmacharin. It had been predicted by a yogi that this brahmacharin could become a great danger to the holy Brahmins, could even be the cause of death for these holy men, and destroy Madhyadesa. He who could prevent these disasters would live happily in this life and be reborn as a Brahmin in the next. It was also forecast that a Vaishya, wrapped in the skin of a cow, doing penance for killing a cow, was chosen by the gods to carry out this pious deed. Devaka had seen unmistakable signs which pointed towards the Vaishya, Hasta.

‘You mean another murder?’

‘On the contrary, a three-fold deed of good favour. Because you will deliver an unfortunate being from a miserable existence, protect the Brahmins and at the same time achieve the highest well-being for yourself.’

‘Who is this brahmacharin, Lord?’ asked Hasta hesitantly.

‘None of us here knows. He calls himself Piyadasi and his father is a Shudra. So, even if you were caught your punishment would be slight. But

no one will catch you, only the gods will know. Every Brahmin feels threatened because of this dreadful prophecy. You will be the benefactor of the Brahmins and their prayers will support you.'

Every objection raised by Hasta was reasoned away. Their lengthy prayers, offerings as well as fasting, were a decoy to divert Revata's attention, while they convinced Hasta of the gloriousness of his deed. Eventually, the Vaishya gave in. Then Devaka taught him the many ways by which he could achieve his goal. Revata had thought that the Vaishya was visiting Devaka's hermitage for absolution of his sins, when suddenly one day he was gone. This filled Revata with indefinable fears.

After one final great offering ceremony during which all of Hasta's sins were absolved even before they were committed, and during which he was made to swear a sacred oath that he would never talk to anyone about this, not to Piyadasi or anyone else, he left for Sayana's hermitage.

Hasta sought Piyadasi's company quite openly and attempted to win his confidence. The Prince, however, felt suspicious of him and thus kept up his guard. One night—the rains having subsided—they sat together on the verandah with Sayana.

'What, O, wise Sayana, is a man supposed to do to walk the holy path?'

'Not just one holy path, but many holy pathways lead to Oneness with the Brahman, Hasta.'

'Richika said: the study of the Vedas, performance of the forty rites, good deeds, and austerity. But you then, and Piyadasi?'

Ashoka became attentive ... Richika! So, Hasta knew Devaka's hermitage! Feigning seriousness, he said:

'The path? Do you not know then, the two cardinal sets of words of the Upanishads: *Tat Tvam Asi*, That thou Art, and *Aham Brahma Asmi*, I am Brahman? If you want to seek the path, look for it within yourself! How much gold and how many cows did you give as payment to the priest Richika—that is the name of your priest is it not?—to have him convince you of his wisdom, Hasta? And as far as austerity is concerned, the *Chandogya Upanishad* observes: Brahman is life, Brahman is joy, Brahman is abundance ... What do you then wish to achieve by austerity?'

Sayana smiled and nodded. 'You see, Hasta that is one way already. The *Mundaka Upanishad* assures the attainment of divinity to one who lives in

seclusion and practises asceticism and faith. So, what Richika says, may be a path as well.

‘But Gautama says that, though purified by the forty rites, he who lacks the eight good qualities will not become one with Brahman and will not reach heaven,’ remarked Ashoka.

‘Eight good qualities?’ Hasta realised that he should not have mentioned Richika.

‘Yes, of which compassion and truth are the most important.’

Ashoka now left the other two alone. Hasta pondered about the words of Piyadasi. How could this young man be a harbinger of misfortune for Madhyadesa and the holy Brahmins, when he was such a good pupil and great friend of the Brahmin Sayana? Perhaps, the wise Sayana had not heard of the fateful prophecy concerning Piyadasi! In any case, he, Hasta, had abjured his penance and had been chosen for the great deed: liberating the Brahmins and Madhyadesa ... indeed, the liberation of Piyadasi himself! He was bound by his oath of silence, otherwise he would have spoken to Sayana about it. Accomplishing a great deed! The reward was deliverance from his great sin and from the varna of his fathers.

But Ashoka’s suspicions were aroused and so had diminished Hasta’s chances of deliverance from his sin. Hasta’s attempts had been the result of clever planning by the cunning Devaka, but were encountered by the Prince with even sharper cleverness.

The next morning, Hasta brought Piyadasi his meal. Strange? ‘Your own safety comes first!’ his Father had said. He took the bowl from Hasta and walked away.

‘Where are you going, Piyadasi?’ asked the Vaishya, surprised.

‘I am going to offer this to the sacred animals of Sayana’s hermitage, the cows.’

Hasta went pale. ‘No, no!’ He wanted to pry the bowl from Ashoka’s hands. Ashoka, however, moved faster, firmly grabbing the Vaishya’s arm and frightening him. The Prince then threw the food to some chickens which picked at it greedily and soon fell over, dead.

‘Well, Hasta, do you comprehend that?’ Hasta could utter no word, looking at the Prince with wide eyes. Ashoka left him standing there, rooted in his own thoughts, and went quietly about his work. Now he was certain. Where was Revata? Why had he not warned him about the Vaishya? Who

was Hasta? Only one chakra... But no, it was better to know what the man wanted! No discussions shall be made about this with Sayana.

Unobserved, Ashoka now kept constant watch on the guest. He followed him, hidden behind trees and bushes and saw how the man caught, with the great skill that only the farmers possessed, seven black scorpions. He slipped them into the basket normally meant for roots and fruits that had been gathered. The deadly creatures ended up in his sleeping quarters.

At night, after his bath and prayer at Sayana's, Ashoka said:

'Honourable and wise Sayana, there are seven black scorpions in my sleeping quarters. You know their sting is deadly.'

Sayana shot up in alarm.

'Come with me, my beloved brahmacharins, let not my hospitality conclude fatally for a guest of my hermitage.' The pupils looked at the enigmatic young man with awe. Ashoka stayed back with Hasta, whose wild eyes kept darting every now and then at the Prince. When the others returned, Piyadasi thanked them and respectfully bid his teacher a good night. Confused, Hasta also went to his sleeping-place. How did the Prince know about the scorpions! That brahmacharin frightened him! Devaka had warned him that Piyadasi was no easy opponent. But it was the only way to save his soul ...

With infinite patience Hasta went about searching in the jungle; now he stood still, and ever so slowly, bent over. With a lightning movement he grabbed a cobra by its tail and swung it in long, quick circles above his head. The reptile was unable to arch its agile body because of the rapid movement. Ashoka observed interestedly. The Vaishya suddenly grabbed the dangerous snake by its neck with a steady hand. Though the reptile twisted and turned furiously, Hasta did not let go. Deftly, he threw the thrashing snake into a basket and wiped the sweat off his brow.

That night the same scene was repeated.

'Honourable and wise Sayana, there is a cobra in my sleeping quarters. Would it be alright if Hasta caught it?' Everyone jumped up.

'My Piyadasi, Hasta is my guest!'

'Hasta is a farmer and often chances on dangerous animals on his land, O, dear Sayana. Come, Hasta.'

The Vaishya went along reluctantly. His face grew sallow. He looked back nervously at the brahmacharin, who held a gleaming chakra in his

hand.

‘Catch him alive, Hasta. You know the art.’

‘Lord!’

‘I am no Lord; I am a brahmacharin!’

‘Lord, the reptile is as vengeful as a Brahmin.’

‘As a sacrificial priest, you mean. See, my chakra, it can separate your head from your body effortlessly when the cobra bites you. Then, you will be liberated from all your suffering.’ There was no choice. What if he dangled the cobra before Piyadasi’s face? But the gleaming chakra was ready to be cast! Hasta caught the cobra. Together they then came back to the premises.

‘Now, grab hold of the reptile and swing it in circles above your head, Hasta, and hold it tightly, for my chakra is swifter than the Maruts.’

Hasta dared not defy Piyadasi. Soon, the cobra was being whirled above the head of the repentant sinner. Ashoka now flung his weapon with accuracy at the Vaishya. Even before fear sent Hasta ducking, he was holding one-half of the awful reptile in his hand while the other end flew off into the distance. Hasta let the remains of the reptile slide out of his hands and stood, glassy-eyed.

‘Now, go back to bed, Hasta. Tomorrow you will embark on a pilgrimage to the sacred Narmada to obtain forgiveness for your sins. First, kneel before the holy Sayana, whose Brahmin hospitality you have abused.’

Hasta kneeled and bowed his head silently into the damp sand.

Ashoka told Sayana what he had encountered during the last few days.

‘Without a doubt it is the hand of Devaka, revered Sayana. Devaka has deserved my chakra many times but I fear that something has happened to Revata. Tomorrow I will leave for Devaka’s hermitage.’

‘Do not go, Piyadasi. Your father believes that you are safe here. Devaka is a dangerous man.’

‘A coward, who lets others carry out his cunning plans and who himself hides behind the safe walls of Brahmin-hood!’

‘Be sensible! Revata is a Shudra. If need be, send soldiers. Revata will know how to protect himself.’

‘Revata is certainly as clever as any guru from Taxila. He is a human being and my friend. Would I leave him now in the hands of someone like Devaka? I fear for his safety there.’

‘Your life is worth more than that of a thousand Revatas.’

‘Then the higher I value my friend Revata, the more my worth will be, O, noble Sayana. But if I did not count one such friend then I would not count for a thousand and thus not myself.’

‘Wait for help from Pataliputra as the Ganga is too high.’

‘I am afraid I am already too late. I must leave early tomorrow morning. I am well armed and trust in Shiva.’

Sayana did not oppose any longer and could not but admire the unblemished character of the Prince.

Very early the next morning, Ashoka took the road to Richika’s hermitage, wrapped in a deer-skin of Sayana’s. High leather leggings protected him from snakes and leeches. His gaze swept across all sides to see if predators menaced him. The road was difficult, wet, and sometimes hardly passable. His robust young body, however, did not tire. He wanted to find Revata and barely took notice of the thousand discomforts and dangers of the jungle during the monsoon. Sissus and kikars, palms and banyan trees, pelted him with heavy raindrops and their biting, sucking residents, but the battle against them did not impede his progress along the arduous road.

After hours of struggle he arrived at the hermitage. It appeared to have been abandoned. Ashoka whistled his elephant signal which Revata knew. The whistle was answered from behind the buildings. The Prince hurried there and found Revata locked up in a heavily barricaded barn. He removed the heavy bar and, entering, found a smaller and much more strongly built enclosure inside in which the Shudra was seated.

‘Sire, leave this barn immediately or they will shut you in as well,’ said Revata hastily and fearfully. ‘Sire, you are not safe with them!’ Ashoka approached Revata calmly.

‘First, let me try to free you, my friend.’

‘Sire, the four of them have barred the stockade and fortified it. It is impossible to get me out of here quickly. Do not wait any longer. Flee!’

‘Do you think that four priests are able to keep the two of us in a simple barn? How did you get here?’

‘Some time ago, I saw that Hasta had suddenly disappeared ... he was a sinner who had killed a cow for which he was doing penance in a pasture. He was a frequent visitor to the hermitage. On his visits he often had long

talks with Devaka and Richika. Whenever I got close to them, their talk turned to sin and penance, or about the Vedas and the forty rites of the Vaishya. But once, when I had entered the hermitage stealthily, I heard the names of Sayana and Piyadasi being mentioned. The next morning Hasta was gone. A voice inside me said my Lord was in danger. I wanted to leave and told them that I was going to Kosala. As if they had already planned so, all five of them grabbed me and dragged me to this stockade. Evidently, they were scared that I would go to Sayana's hermitage to warn you. Now I was certain. I spent the first days here in mortal fear for you, O, Prince. Every attempt to escape failed. After long hours of contemplation, my faith in Shiva was restored, Sire.'

Ashoka then narrated what happened with Hasta.

'Sire, the danger is much greater here! You do not yet know Devaka!'

'A coward!'

Ashoka wanted to proceed to Richika's hermitage to force the priests to free Revata. But a heavy beam now blocked the exit. Shakuni, who had heard the elephant whistle as well, had followed Ashoka quietly. He shrank back when he recognised Devaka's opponent. When Ashoka had entered the gate, he carefully closed it and ran back to Devaka. The priest laughed. 'Take a horse and race to Pataliputra. Alert Prince Sumana and inform him to come here himself, along with a dozen most trusted archers.'

'What should we do?' asked Richika, somewhat frightened at the daring deed. 'We did not even need Hasta,' remarked Devaka dryly.

'The Maharajah will not save any of us! Defying his will and justness once again will cost us our lives!'

'The Maharajah will not know. Prince Sumana will be here shortly. And what happens afterwards will be on his head, not ours. The responsibility is his alone. We were merely exiled in the jungle; that we have not transgressed.'

'Defiance against the judgement of the Maharajah! The Ganga is high!'

'With gold you can buy a good boat. Shakuni is already on the way.'

Richika bowed his head.

'Tristus and Sunasepha, keep watch at the stockade. Reinforce it, where necessary.'

'Devaka, we play for high stakes!'

‘What do you want, Richika? Will you let a Shudra trample upon the varna of the Brahmins, one who may later become Maharajah? Sumana has him in his power! Prince Sumana will decide, will judge the man who is an enemy of our holy land and its highest varna! We Brahmins will not disturb one hair on his head. The Maharajah would punish us without mercy!’

‘And if he should be freed?’

‘He will never be freed!’ Devaka hollered, emphasising his every word. ‘The gods require a great sacrifice! They are afraid! Who will feed and quench them, if the priests can no longer bring sacrifices in Magadha and Madhyadesa? And if the gods die of starvation and thirst, the land also dies, like the harvest does in the season of Jyeshtha.’

Richika gave in. As they waited for Sumana, Tristus reported on what the prisoners were doing. A few hours went by.

‘The Prince is cutting away at the stockade with his sword.’

‘Teak cannot be chopped with a little sword.’

At the barn, Ashoka himself had come to the same conclusion; he then tried to dig under one of the posts.

‘They are trying to pull one of the posts out of the ground, Devaka.’

‘They will fail; our palisades are high as well as deep!’

The priests waited. The news from their men came one after the other:

‘They have wrenched away one of the posts, Devaka.’

‘Revata is freed, Devaka.’

‘They want to batter down the outer stockade but we are reinforcing it where they are trying to batter it down, Devaka.’

‘Hold on a little longer, Tristus, their hands are not suitable for such work.’

‘They are building a ladder and hope to climb over the outer stockade, Devaka.’

‘They are both climbing the outer stockade and Prince Ashoka wants to speak to you, Devaka.’

The priest mocked coldly: ‘Let him come here!’ He looked up the road to Pataliputra.

Tristus left again and returned shortly.

‘The Prince orders us to open the gate, or it will be a battle of life and death.’

‘Then kill him!’

‘Devaka, come with us! This can never end well!’

‘Not necessarily, Richika. Sumana’s troops are coming.’

‘Go!’ That was an order and Devaka finally obeyed but grabbed a bow and some arrows which they used in emergency to protect themselves from wild animals. The four now stood a short distance away from the stockade. Ashoka and Revata were sitting astride it.

‘What does the Prince want?’

‘Open the gate, Devaka.’

‘I have no right to open the gate.’

‘Then who, scoundrel?’ Ashoka’s expression darkened.

‘You will soon see.’ Ashoka felt his temper rising.

‘I spared your life a number of times, Devaka. Think. A Maurya will not let himself be locked up by a Brahmin priest. Open the gate!’

‘I did not once ask you to spare my life. It was not I who locked you in. After all, the Maharajah would punish me!’

‘Know what you are doing, priest, and why you are living in the jungle! You dare to oppose the judgement of the Maharajah, Richika.’

‘You are not our prisoner. I am no longer in charge of your prison.’

‘So, Richika, you dare imprison a Maurya, Chandragupta’s grandson, the Viceroy of Ujjain, in a barn and hope to hand him over to your accomplices in the month of Jyeshtha!’ Richika trembled. ‘Open the gate, I order all four of you!’ Ashoka’s voice roared through the jungle. His rage overcame all his self-control.

‘A prisoner does not give orders!’ But Devaka’s gaze up the road became more nervous.

‘I have given over control of you to others,’ said Richika hesitatingly. Ashoka noticed his confusion.

‘So, to Sumana! And once again, will he dispatch hired assassins? And does the former head-priest of the Brahmin-court think I will tolerate that?’

‘You will have to,’ snarled Devaka.

‘So, you refuse? Do you hear the raven scratching yonder, Richika?’

‘I refuse.’

Ashoka noticed how Devaka glanced along the road to Pataliputra once again, and then raised his bow and arrow. The Prince knew what that meant

and thought it was ridiculous. His deep contempt for the impudent, religious fanatic, his anger at the arrogance of the defender of the Brahmin-varna, surged up and the immediate response to the raising of the bow was for him to reach for his chakras.

‘Shiva!’ Three chakras cut through the air one after the other and killed the three priests.

Sunashepha had retreated some distance to the rear. Ashoka and Revata expected little resistance from him and the Prince no longer demanded of him that he opened the gate. After some battering, tugging and pulling by the two strong young men, one of the high posts yielded and soon after a second post fell. They were then able to leave their prison.

‘What do you want to do with the fourth Brahmin, Lord.’

‘An accuser without witness! Let him live.’

‘Sire, kill him; you will have all the sacrificial priests against you!’

‘They already wish to destroy me. Find my chakras, Revata, and clean them.’

He walked towards the priest.

‘You see, Sunasepha, Shiva will not have his power trifled with. Why were you banished to the jungle? You do not answer. Your response to the favour of the supreme judge, the Maharajah, is that of an ingrate, priest. You have dared to take prisoner a Mauryan Prince, locked him in a barn within a stockade, to hand him over to his arch-enemy. I do not consider it necessary to kill you. The Maharajah will judge and sentence you, when he uncovers the plots you have hatched in the hermitage. I will now let you go free, if you head quickly towards the Himalayas, keeping twice as much distance as there is between here and Pataliputra. Do not dare to ever return. The moment you appear in Pataliputra, your death is certain. Repeat that, Sunasepha!’

Sunasepha remained silent. Then, Ashoka reached for his chakra once again.

‘Repeat it, assassin!’

‘The moment I appear in Pataliputra, my death is certain.’

‘Remember that. Go!’ The frightened priest hastened towards the shelter of the woods, now and then looking back to see if the Wild Prince would yet send a chakra after him.

‘Let us hide, Sire! Shakuni will be returning shortly!’

Revata knew all the places in the vicinity where one could hide. In one they waited until a small body of riders, led by Sumana and Shakuni, came into view. Ashoka and Revata heard how the rough warriors bellowed in laughter. 'Shiva!' exclaimed one of them. Shakuni called for Sunasepha. There was no answer. Later, he ordered for the bodies to be cremated.

When the Prince and Revata returned to the hermitage, Ashoka told Sayana what had taken place.

'Why did you hasten to employ the harshest punishment, my Piyadasi?'

'Because the priests violated the decree of the Emperor. For that they owed their lives.'

'They had not yet violated the sentence.'

'Not against the word of the law, but against the spirit of it. Laws exist for the rights and welfare of all the people. They persisted in their attempts on my life as if there had never been a righteous Maharajah. Shakuni was on his way to Pataliputra to get Sumana and his accomplices.'

'Still, your temper was a poor counsellor. The highest punishment for a Brahmin is death by drowning.'

'That is the appropriate procedure. The penalty of death was necessary and just, and what I applied here was nothing more than carrying out my Father's sentence. An Emperor will not allow himself to be threatened by a Devaka, not even if he is a priest.'

'It is a most dangerous weapon in the hands of the Brahmin-court.'

'The Brahmin-court should know what to expect, if I ever become Maharajah.'

'But you must also take into consideration a population that could be inflammable.'

'That population could as well have been inflamed if I had not punished the villains. Now that I have regained my composure, I still believe that what I did was just and lawful and that I acted responsibly. I want power and justice for the sake of the subjects. They want it only out of selfishness for their small privileged group. This much I do know: they will pursue every possible means of securing their objectives. So will I. My Father has always tolerated Devaka's crimes; but no priest can ever expect such indulgence from me. The sacrificial priests for their supposed gods, I for the peoples of India! I thank you, my wise Sayana, for your wise lessons and for your glorious hospitality.'

Then, the Prince kneeled before the sage and bowed: ‘May Shiva, the Lord of life and death, spare your precious life for a long time, highly revered Sayana. Maybe, I will never see you again, or after a fierce battle. My life until now has been but a child’s game in my merciful Father’s park. Difficulty and uncertainty lie before me. I shall remember you always, great Brahmin, who is as true as the celestial house of Shiva on Mount Kailash, broad in your thoughts as is beautiful Jambudvipa, deep as the silent Lake Manasa far on the Hymavant, whose waters wash away all sins.’

‘*Tat Tvam Asi*, my Piyadasi. Remember, that the enemy too is a thought, born from the eternal spirit ... *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* ... ‘many names the poets gave, for what is only one’ ...

‘Thus, my father, I killed three Brahmin priests ...’

Bindusara pondered for a long time over the impact of Ashoka’s words.

‘You understand, my son, that I approve of the sentence but I would not think of making the Brahmins my enemies. In a woods filled with poisonous snakes, one does not shout either, lest it attracts the attention of the tigers.’

‘In the ocean of hate, it is impossible to dig a sacred lotus pond, my beloved father; in the dense jungle, it is impossible to plant a sacred banyan tree, or build a sacred hermitage in a blazing forest.’

‘But one does not make the ocean larger, or extend the jungle, or beg Vayu for the winds in a burning forest.’

‘Someone condemned to death, like I was already by them, to condemn to death again, can give only the judge satisfaction. The condemned can defend but one life, by striking back at his enemies. The gluttons for sacrifices have made me forget how to seek their favours. I feel no obligation towards them. Their hatred has followed me. I knew what they meant to me and now they also know what I mean to them.’

‘If you wish to become the Maharajah, your path will be difficult.’

‘I would not desire anything different. Then at least, I will not need their advice.’

‘Tomorrow I will send my foremen on the roads to Ujjain. Leave as speedily as possible. Choose your own guards. A viceroy journeys on the royal elephant. Be even more careful than you have been till now. It is not the priest alone who does what he calls the will of the gods! And which queen?’

‘No queen, my Father. Twice I had wanted a wife. Aradi hated me because of Sumana’s beauty and his rights as the firstborn. Madri of Mathura did not want me because of her love for my friend Kala. Devaka had her killed for that. Probably, no woman will ever be so foolish as to want me for myself. The others I can get when I want. So, I am not in a hurry and have some time yet.’

When Ashoka appeared the next morning at the army camp, something unusual occurred. Everyone felt that Prince Sumana, in the guise of granting favours, really sought for their favours and, feigning interest, in return also got insincere interest. Prince Ashoka’s deeds were woven into legends around him which, strengthened by their respect and love, made him a figure of veneration. To the imaginative people he was a fabled figure: like Shiva, the god of life and of death, adored and feared, in both forms. And so, it was that the love for the Wild Prince grew into reverence and hushed awe. When Revata told him that the soldiers thought him to be an incarnation of Shiva, he smiled: Shiva, his most revered deity; like the sun who did not send four kinds of rays for each of the varnas, but fine, clear, life-giving rays, for all; like Brihaspati, who did not shower four different kinds of rain on the earthly inhabitants, but gloriously refreshing rains for all; like Vayu, who drove his healthy, vitalising air over all beings. Why was it then, that what came from human beings, had to be divided into four gifts of such vast difference? How happy he had felt before when he was accepted as one of them. Now, they lifted him high—higher!—by humbling themselves more and he could no longer come close, reach to them. He could no longer beg for their friendship, nor call them, as they had fantasised him into a distant, mystical deity. He did not want to be a deity but a human being like them, and working like them; after all, he thought, ‘There is no greater deed than to work for the welfare of all’. His path lay there!

And so, he rode along their rows and his face tightened; and they felt he was even more their king, their god.

But the elephants trumpeted and lumbered towards him, their trunks stretched out to him, with friendly, honest eyes and flapping ears. Much like before. The horses whinnied in warm friendship, like in the months before. For the soldiers it was even more of a proof of the godliness of their fantasised idol.

Ashoka, along with Sela, determined which of the men he could use in Ujjain. Then, he bade farewell to the thousands of soldiers who had gathered on all sides of the large training fields. He held his hand up and a tense silence fell along the rows.

‘May Shiva give you health, strength, loyalty and courage in your heart for the Maharajah!’

All bowed deeply in agreement with his words. But the Prince could bear it no longer. He wanted to rekindle happy memories, such as his memories of the great camps.

‘If I ever return to your midst, will you then receive me as your friend that I always was, or as a stranger?’ he suddenly burst out. It was as if a smoldering fire in each heart broke out in flames, and in an overwhelming blaze blew over the field:

‘Like a friend, forever ... forever ... forever!’ The sound of echo followed the word ‘forever’ and surged through the warriors, fading away to an emotion that gripped them all.

‘Until we meet again! May Shiva protect your lives!’

A deafening cheer broke out. Then Ashoka rode off quickly, alone, furiously, to Pataliputra. The farewell to his youth seared his soul. Now he was the Viceroy, higher than the kings of India. Life in Ujjain appeared to him to be one of loneliness. There was no uprising to be quelled, only a government to be arranged; a struggle with lazy or greedy officers, or deceitful merchants and caravan leaders, maybe, ... with priests and smaller kings.

Before his brother had left for Taxila, Ashoka departed with a relatively small army. He had left Sela behind in the camp, which added luster to the recollections of the Wild Prince. Satyavat and Nata looked after his interests in the palace; Khallataka was his support in the Ministers’ Council. He knew that all his friends were completely devoted to him. A non-stop messenger service with Ujjain was established. A number of Ashoka’s highly trusted friends would take their place in Sumana’s army. He could trust Prince Kala completely, as far as Taxila was concerned. But he missed Kullika. He wanted to persuade him to come to Ujjain. Kullika was his support, because he weighed with open heart all of Ashoka’s decisions and insecurities, after which he expressed his clear, true and honest opinion. Kullika’s word was as immaculate as the snow on the Himalayas and as

mild as the fragrance of the Ashoka-flower. An irresistible desire for the Brahmin drove him, to dispatch a small contingent of his troops under Jala to Ayodhya, to accompany Kullika to Ujjain. Ashoka's troops made their leisurely way up the road to Ujjain. He was in no haste, spurred by emotion for important work or uncertainty about its success.

WEARING THE MOST GLORIOUS BLOSSOM

‘When will the Prince arrive in Vidisha? If it will be long, you will have time to repair the roads properly.’

‘I have positioned men who will immediately report to me when the Prince is approaching, my Ila. Just make sure our house is ready at all times to receive him. The Maharajah is not lenient to those who carry out his orders badly. Besides, it is profitable for the merchants if the Prince forms a favourable impression about our hospitality. He who renders service obtains indebtedness.

‘Your house is always in good order, Subhadra,’ pouted Ila.

‘I know. But the first impression is often decisive. Has Devi’s jewelry been checked? I want her to welcome the Prince as the daughter of a distinguished merchant. Emperor Bindusara should be satisfied with Vidisha and the high varna of merchants.’

‘Would a wild youth like Prince Ashoka ever care to notice the jewelry of a merchant-Princess coming from the interiors of the Vindhya, my Father?’

‘They say the Prince has eyes like Shiva. Sisupala, who returned some days ago from Taxila with a merchant’s caravan, told me that Ashoka

observed everything that happened around him with incredible accuracy. He is as interested in a trifling Egyptian statuette as in the holy Nagas of Taxila. But he is not much interested in women and certainly not if girls ignore their jewelry. We shall ride up and meet him and travel some yodhyanas with him.'

'I am very curious to see that Wild Prince. I have been told so many unpleasant things about him! According to Shakuni, he is as ugly as Prince Sumana is handsome. Sisupala told me that children run away from him, even the wild dogs of Taxila flee, their tails tucked between their legs, when he looks at them.'

'They say his eyes instil fear in tigers. But the ministers of Taxila have sent the old and wise Vimalamitra to the capital to ask that Ashoka be kept on as the viceroy.'

'Why then does he not send us Sumana?'

'Thank the gods that he remains far from us. He is a boon companion of the priests and parrots whatever they say, a foppish young man who spends his time with courtesans, takes pleasure in drinking and play, and has not the slightest interest in the people of Bindusara's empire. If he came here, the caravan traders could continue their cheating and bribing. The king's officers would become rich and the Maharajah would have to make do with what is left over. I think he knows why he must send Ashoka. A mahamatra who deceives this Prince will have to pay for his deceit by going directly to Yama, and then be reborn as a hyena.'

'I understand then, father, that men respect Ashoka but that the Brahmin Shakuni and women prefer Sumana,' laughed Devi, and Subhadra's face brightened because of her happy laugh.

'Stop your mockery, Devi. When he sees you, he may desire you! And I will not be able to refuse him. That would be for you most dreadful!'

'Queen of the wild, ugly, godless viceroy of Ujjain! Puh! Sisupala said he had killed the rebel Virata with one glance of his piercing eyes, and horses and elephants kneel before him because they revere him. And the priests at the Brahmin-court of Pataliputra fear that he—the way Ajatasatru killed his father, Bimbisara—will murder the Maharajah and ascend the ivory throne of Magadha himself. Whatever comes out of Pataliputra cannot be trusted. That is our experience in Malwa. One of the mahamatras said

that Sumana's friends had made an attempt on the life of Ashoka but the Prince beheaded them all with his chakras. Brrrr! Such a dangerous man!

'Sisupala is a fool. Since the Mauryas started to rule there has been peace in India because law-breakers fear them. May Bindusara appoint a successor who knows what governance is!'

'Are the men from Magadha attracted by cheerfulness or stateliness?' asked Devi thoughtfully.

'Why do you ask that, my child?'

'To know what I must not do.'

'Be sensible, Devi, and do not trust that Brahmin Shakuni. A king who is accorded a warm welcome is always shown the best of what one has. Behave like that. Come with me now to see if the elephants and their caparisons have been taken care of.'

Letting out a sigh, Devi rose from her seat of fine teakwood, covered with brightly coloured rugs from Iran and China. Large and small vases from Mayula decorated every possible corner. Even little Egyptian or Macedonian figurines of gods, which had been shipped with other goods, were displayed in various places. Finely fashioned lamps with silver bases from Sheba stood next to all the seats and on the tables were set out shining polished bowls of beryl, emerald and jade, filled with fruit or flowers.

'Strange, Father, that every land has its own gods! And now, one already talks of gods being reincarnated. One would almost believe that there really were none, or at the most, that we are all mistaken and that it is different from what people had thought.'

'Or, that the gods are the same but that each of us sees them with different eyes.'

'Gautama the Buddha is right: for us our life here is important. For what we make of it we ourselves are to blame, and on that our salvation depends. Actually, a new birth is not so bad, if we could but be reborn to our parents or friends.'

'But there is nothing that guarantees that I will ever see my only child or Ila again in a new life.'

'Maybe, then you will have sons and that would be a greater delight.'

'In any case, not now,' remarked Subhadra. He looked with pride at his daughter's slender figure: tall, of perfect proportions, lovely, lithe, light-hued, with a radiant complexion and a candor, characteristic of her

prominent varna. Neither the beaded belt of polished jade nor the fine muslin dhoti could hide the shape of her comely hips. A shawl of the finest cashmere hung loosely around her shoulders and covered but one of her youthful firm breasts. Pearls from Lanka, looking like fading stars through the dark shining hair, adorned her comb. The soft blush that glowed from her face made her eyes sparkle even more. Ila laughed at her.

‘Is Prince Ashoka unmarried?’ she asked.

‘As far as I know, yes. He is too lively of spirit and too fierce of deed to be concerned much about womanly beauty.’

‘So much the worse, Father, when he calms down to enjoy sweet relaxation,’ she laughed.

‘How shall the King of such an empire ever calm down ... if he becomes the Emperor?’

‘Come, Father, we know that by now. I would have preferred he took the caravan road from Krishnapura to Makeri through the west. Then he could set to work immediately and we would not have to receive him: ugly, savage, and indifferent to what is sacred, and to women ... a danger to the Maharajah ... at least, so said our friendly guest last week. Let him scare robbers on sea and on land, and condemn corrupt traders to death, if he likes that so much. We only have to show him respect because he is the son of Emperor Bindusara, is it not?’

‘Keep quiet about the Brahmin Shakuni. Do not mention his name again. That man with his lustful eyes displeases me more than anything else!’

‘Not me, my Father. It has been a very long time since we had such a cheerful and friendly guest.’

Together they walked over to the stables through the park, which was bursting with blossoms of flowers after the rains. A few dark, curly-haired slaves were grooming elephants and horses with cooling water and leather strips until their hides gleamed. The ceremonial harnesses were tended to, as well as the howdas and the palanquins. Gardeners were spurred to work in great haste, tending the parks; in the palace, too, everyone was busy arranging things to welcome the son of the holy Maharajah, as befitting his dignity.

At night, a messenger came in to report that the Prince would be in Vidisha the next day. The camp was five yodhjanas away. The work was

intensified: the slaves and the nobles—all felt the pressure. Throughout the city Subhadra made announcements that the Viceroy of Ujjain would be arriving the next day and that everyone must pay the guest the honour that which was due to him.

Ushas had barely coloured the eastern heavens red—Surya's rays were still clouded in mist—when Ashoka's camp rose and began preparations for their entry into Vidisha. The Maharajah wanted each entry to be made with great splendour. Each city must be thoroughly overwhelmed by the power, greatness and wealth of the Mauryas. The small army set off in perfect order, richly and elegantly liveried, the royal elephant adorned with heavy gold-embroidered coverings. Ashoka, who had been on horseback for most of the journey, now dressed in his royal dress of white and gold, rode the elephant, sitting in the shining howdah. When the mist faded under the rays of the rising sun, he saw from a distance every now and then the slender towers of Vidisha's walls emerge, hidden by the palms high above the reed-filled shores of the Netravati.

Vidisha ... he had traveled through and been welcomed with honour, in city after city ... after all, he was the Viceroy of the land, a representative of the mightiest Emperor of the world. This tedious, ceremonial march bored him. The journey made him lazy. Sometimes he rode on ahead on horseback, riding up and down the hills or disappearing from view of the troops to a distant plateau, while the army marched slowly and ceremoniously, solemnly on. Then, he could be alone with his thoughts... Was he being put away in Ujjain? Did his father fear him? He had the feeling that Bindusara was keeping his motives a close-guarded secret. Sumana consulted fortune-telling priests to know what the future would bring. He, Ashoka, did not have any faith in these charlatans. Sayana was fifty times wiser than all the fortune-tellers put together, and he said that he knew nothing, nothing of the future. Should he, Ashoka, then believe anything at all yet that those sacrificial gluttons said? It would depend on himself what his life became. Would he allow the Mauryas to be ruined, let India fall apart, let whole groups of people despair, let raging wars tear the country apart? More clearly than ever before, he felt that the gods, or Brahma, no, Shiva ... his own soul, urged him, compulsively, irresistibly urged him, to seize power when Bindusara was no longer there. To let events run their course would truly be the death of him. If Shiva had wished

so, he could have felled him with one glimpse of his eye, one lightning ray on the 'Barren Mountain', when he had offered Him his body.

In the distance, yet another parade approached to welcome him into the city! He was going to Malwa to establish order, not to receive tributes. It was not he they honoured, neither his deeds, at most, it was fear of him. The Maharajah demanded it. For the enjoyment of power? Fear, that the people would not respect the power of the Emperor? Why that enjoyment of power? Why does man ask for respect? Great cavalcades? Obedience to the government! That is what he would demand, and nothing else! Which Raja now awaited to honour his father again, by lavishing hospitality upon the order of the Emperor! Security, at the order of the Emperor? If only Kullika were here! He would make it acceptable to him that it is necessary and proper for the country that a prominent subject—by grace of the Emperor prominent—should warmly welcome him, the Viceroy. Kullika! He felt lonely amongst all these strangers. Thousands of subjects! Ujjain. Work for Bindusara's vast lands and people, nay, peoples! A duty repeated a thousand times, not to be opposed, because of its necessity: protecting the people from themselves, since they still grovel before the priests who suck them dry; protecting them from the Maharajah who sends forth greedy mahamatras. Governance! Should that not be: protecting the weak, the people, animals, forests, from the men in power who have for centuries been trampling on the souls and bodies of those people, driving them to a state where all of life's joy and cheer were smothered by fear, as the priests smothered the poor animals. The Maharajah protects the priests with his laws of injustice, protects the palace officers who take what is not theirs from defenceless Vaishyas and from Shudras, cast out into the wasteland of society; or the despised Chandalas, discarded from all varnas by the priests because their ancestors refused to be harnessed to the yoke of varnas. Are they not human beings? If not, then what? And at whose behest, of the priests? Is that governance? Was it for this that the Maharajah of the glorious India, anointed with the greatest gifts, was elevated to sainthood? Anointed to sainthood! For days, he had trekked through hills and fields, ever farther away from the Ganga, contemplating, devising, seeking and not finding. Strike down all that stands to profit at the cost of another? Impossible! Leave everything the way it is, and try to ease some of the suffering here and there? Impossible! Teach the people, so they gain insight into why they are overpowered by the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas?

Impossible! Teach Sayana's wisdom to all people? Impossible! What then, what then, Kullika? Instigate, cowardly and on the sly, their minds against their oppressors, like the priests do ... Impossible! Divide and apportion the country to Sumana, Sampadi, Sayadra, Dravada and his other pampered brothers: Impossible! He himself would rule, no, govern! The procession nears as Ashoka's thoughts continue. A minor king or chief of the local government ... the country is teeming with small kings who besmirch their souls by snatching riches from the huge human herd, instead of eradicating poverty, hunger, sickness and drought.

Yonder, they are coming, riding on elephants, of course. Even if they preferred horses, Rajas ride on elephants! After all, he did as well. What a grand sight! The gold and gemstones of the saddle coverings sparkled in the morning sun, a play of colours ranging from a deep gleaming blue, a glowing red, to a purple splendour. The elephant's ivory tusk fitted with shining yellow metal ornaments. Beautiful women, or daughters, or female slaves in the palanquin ... The drums rumble, the conches blare, the flutes trill their melancholic songs, like they do everywhere where rich Rajas journey through the fields of the Vaishyas. Vaishyas who are forced to offer until they have nothing more left to give. This is the way the Maharajah wants it: Coerced exhibition of respect, bowing down towards the ground. And Kullika says that all these things are the supporting pillars of the great, solid building of the Mauryan empire. But it is the very loud laughter that belies the grief and suffering.

Subhadra brought his daughter before the Viceroy. From her howda, Devi looked on seriously at Ashoka, haughty as a priestess. She knew that a woman's golden laugh would normally inflame a man's heart; yet that was not what she wished. She already knew Ashoka—from Shakuni's stories—long before she saw him. Ashoka's face in profile displayed the imperturbable, stony hardness of the son of the Maurya, who was one with the Emperor. But in his young heart his blood raced at the sight of her. Exactly that earnestness and pride! It was as though Madri of Mathura was standing right here, cool and haughty, as if he would demand her! Why should this one not want him? Sheer coquetry? She was as beautiful as Madri: a fine oval face, soft, black shining hair, slim, youthful vigour and a grace as if Kama had created her just for himself. She bowed to escape his piercing gaze but rose instantly again, proud, and looked at him, while her clear eyes widened, intensifying the intelligence of her face. Ashoka came

very close to her, bowed slightly, and—as fury flickered across his face—he said pointedly but only loud enough for her to hear and no one else:

‘How ugly does the Princess Devi find the Wild Prince of Pataliputra, and how savage that wild warrior, and how uninterested in sacredness and women, and how great a danger to the Maharajah?’

Devi’s eyes widened in fright. His mocking smile pierced painfully into her soul, like Kama’s arrow. How did this Prince know what she thought, had just yesterday said? Shiva? Ashoka was turning away from her when she spoke softly:

‘I was never told that Prince Ashoka had such beautiful eyes, and a tiger is as savage as Brihaspati made him but a man is as wild as he himself wants to be, high Prince.’

Ashoka felt a slight tremour.

‘Only once in my life has a woman dared to praise my eyes, beautiful Devi,’ he said, calmer now.

‘Am I too forthright if I ask who?’

‘Madri of Mathura, beautiful as Ushas. She died the same night,’ he said, his voice as cold as his face.

‘Died!’ Devi became frightened. The Brahmin Shakuni was right then, when he called him a savage.

‘I do not understand why a woman has to die because she praises the eyes of a Prince.’

‘She died because she did not want me,’ said Ashoka calmly, his voice light and mocking.

Devi looked at the Prince. Her face did not even hide her feeling of outrage for this man who seemed to lack all sense. Would she, too, have to die if he wanted her and she refused?

‘I thank the beautiful Princess kindly that she accompanied her father to meet a Prince of whom she had undoubtedly not heard very kind things.’

Ashoka turned again to her father and Devi was once again bewildered by his words. Those were not the words of a savage! At most, those are words of one who had been offended; and one who had a right to feel offended! Not a single kind thought had yet come to her about him; thoughts of obligation, of disapproval, of curiosity maybe, not mere curiosity for a stranger, but for the stranger who had been portrayed as a vain being, usurping power, insensitive to the rights of others. Was any of

that true? He had the strong-willed eyes of a ruler; what was the goal of such wilfulness? The Brahmin Shakuni, to whom Father had granted hospitality for some time, said that Prince Ashoka respected no laws, spared no Brahmin, and had crushed the rights of the eldest son. He also said the Prince had quelled the rebellion in Taxila not through valour but with cunning trickery. The Dasyus had pushed the waters of the Indus higher than ever and flooded the harvest fields to punish the people who had welcomed the Prince festively. He wanted to throw aside Prince Sumana, an honest and devout man, who obeyed the Maharajah and the priests and was no rufian like Ashoka. The Emperor had, however, recalled the wild one and appointed the good Prince Sumana as the Viceroy of Taxila. She had believed the friendly young Brahmin all too easily, anguishing over the domination of evil in this world. But now she vacillated. Prince Ashoka was too deliberate, too calm, too self-assured in his actions, too precise in his words to be as wild, devious, and dishonest as the Brahmin Shakuni wanted her to believe. She felt ashamed now and regretted her unkind attitude. This Prince was, after all, the Viceroy of Ujjain, was he not? It is a position regarded as very important by the Maharajah.

Ashoka did not seem to be thinking of her any longer. He was in an animated discussion with Subhadra, who knew everything about life in Ujjain. He talked about the caravans that travelled constantly from the seaports to Ujjain, and about the merchandise from foreign lands that they distributed all along the trade routes in every post of Bindusara's empire. The Prince was thirsty for knowledge, keen in judgement, and asked many appropriate questions with the result that he soon knew much more of the situation in the western lands than Subhadra had actually intended to tell him.

Ila welcomed the Prince and the commanders with great warmth. She surrounded him with a care that touched the suspicious Maurya. His mistrust had no chance of spreading its black wings. After he had bathed and dressed, Subhadra invited him to their reception hall, where Ila, Devi and a few ministers and their wives, sons and daughters were present to meet the new young Viceroy. Ashoka had a friendly word for all the women and young men but avoided Devi. Then he asked the ministers about their work, income, expenses, administration of justice, how workers necessary for the palace were found and trained. He listened with untiring interest to

the smallest details. To their great surprise, he knew much about conditions, to which they had hardly ever given a thought.

Ila had offered the Prince fruit, cakes, wine, and the refreshing juice of mangoes. She knew that, while travelling, a son of the ruling Maharajah would take nothing without being certain that it was safe. For this reason she said: 'Honoured King, it is the custom of this house that the hostess shares with a prominent guest the food that is offered. Would this be acceptable to you?'

'I would be pleased, honourable Ila. It will taste twice as enjoyable then.' Ashoka broke a piece of cake in two and offered Ila one of the halves.

'First, you, my Prince, as you are our guest.'

Devi, inconspicuous, kept Ashoka in her view; she saw how he was struck by her mother's hospitality, and observed the deference with which he treated her and other women. Towards her, however, he remained cool, hardly giving a glance. Ila noticed it as well and as an accomplished hostess, tried to include Devi in taking care of her guest.

'Come, Devi, you may offer the Viceroy of Ujjain the most delicious fruit that our land has to offer. Take two.' Blushing, Devi sprang up, took a golden bowl filled with two big ripe peaches and approached the guest shyly.

'Would you like to share these fruits with me, honoured King?'

'No hands more beautiful than yours have ever offered me a more delicious fruit from India, Princess Devi. You take the first.'

'Our hospitality does not allow it, honoured King,' she apologised. The Prince looked at the beautiful figure of the girl, standing before him in her radiant youth. In contrast to many of the Princesses whom he had met in the last few weeks, she was modestly adorned. Intentionally! The thought occurred to him in a flash. But neither did she wear too little, and the effect was that it all served to enhance her rare beauty. Anklets of the finest jade adorned her slim ankles. Delicate bracelets of gold, embedded with softly gleaming turquoise from Iran, clasped her full arms. Her black hair, entwined with cool pearls from Lanka, was tastefully wound around her head. And the blush that suffused her cheeks was like the dewy red of both peaches. The thin dhoti of the finest Kashi-muslin barely concealed the

slender form of her lithe figure. All this gave her an attractiveness that struck Ashoka deeper than Devi was aware of.

‘Your glow is softer than the down of this peach, beautiful Devi, your friendliness more fragrant than its bouquet. So, I offer you this splendid fruit as a symbol and take the other for myself.’

‘The splendour of both will soon pass, Lord; the fragrance of friendliness and fruit fade as quickly as floral nectar in the spring breeze. If the pit, the soul, contains no worthwhile, higher forces, then both are worthless.’

‘I shall plant the pit in the park of my palace, beautiful Devi, and keep an anxious eye on it to see which of you wears the most glorious blossom.’

Devi took her place again in silence. Had Shakuni deceived her? Why? Those eyes could kindle like Agni’s searing fire on its altar, but there was peace within, certainty; there was no longer a trace of an offended Prince.

A messenger of Ashoka’s was announced.

‘May I receive him here, Subhadra?’

‘With great pleasure, honoured Raja. We shall leave you alone.’

‘Please stay here, my Subhadra, ha, Jala ... you bring news from Kullika!’

Devi felt how his voice betrayed emotion. Who was Kullika?

‘Yes, Lord, Kullika sends his greetings. He has recovered. On the very day that I arrived he left for his journey to Ujjain. He hopes to meet you there as soon as possible.’

‘Wonderful, Jala, can he bear the long journey?’

‘Surely, Lord, I have, upon your orders, offered him a steady elephant but Kullika wanted to travel on horseback so as to reach Ujjain faster. He has completely recovered.’

‘Is he being well cared for?’

‘Just as you ordered, Lord.’

‘Go to the camp, Jala. You are exhausted. Bathe, eat and rest. We will leave later for Ujjain. I am very sorry, my Subadhra, that I can enjoy only briefly the hospitality of the lovely Ila and you.’

Devi was disappointed that he did not mention her. She, however, understood. He was disturbed by her attitude. Shakuni, naturally, was an enemy of the Prince and had tried to harm him with untruths and she had believed that wretched, amorous Brahmin.

‘Sire, the Maharajah has instructed us to comply with all your wishes on your travels. Meeting you has been such a pleasure but I would have valued a longer stay.’

‘I understand that your meeting with Kullika must take place as soon as possible, however much we would like to persuade the Maharajah and you of our devotion,’ added Ila.

‘Yes, my divine hostess Ila. I would like to stay here, but Kullika has been my guru. He became ill when I made my hasty return from Taxila to Pataliputra. I had to travel on and leave him behind. Now I feel remorse since the trip was too difficult for him. I myself want to welcome him in Ujjain. Kullika is my greatest friend and will be my purohita. I long to see him but more than anything else, he needs my special care.’

‘Your friend would be very welcome here as well, if you cared to receive him here.’

Devi was once again touched by the Wild Prince. This, she acknowledged in shame. Not one of the accusations of the young Brahmin had turned out to be true. Now, she wanted to let the Prince feel that she had been unfair towards him.

‘We had thought, O, Prince, to escort you to Sanchi,’ Devi added, taking part in the conversation a little shyly, which made her even more attractive. ‘Sanchi is a holy place, which no visitor to Vidisha should fail to see. The road is very beautiful in the season of Sharad.’

Ashoka looked at her with his keen, searching gaze. It seemed as if he wanted to know if she was merely being polite or expressing her own wishes. In either case, she whetted his love for mockery.

‘The beautiful Devi thinks the road to Sanchi is more pleasant than the road from Rupnath to Vidisha, I understand.’ The colour of her cheeks turned a deep flush of red. She thought his subtle mockery was fair and well-earned.

‘The Prince, whom we thought we were to meet there, was a different one from the Raja we wish to take to Sanchi, Lord,’ she said softly.

Such a completely honest acknowledgement from the lovely girl had to make a deep impression on the Prince, who himself was averse to every form of pretence or lie. He had Jala called immediately.

‘Jala, you will be leaving today for Ujjain. Take a group of five fast horsemen and at the same time a bullock-cart with two of the best slaves.

They will take everything with them for the welcome and care of Kullika. I want to visit Sanchi and will come as soon as possible.'

Devi stood up once again, bowed to the Prince and said softly: 'I thank you for forgiving my earlier feelings, my Raja.'

'Perhaps, you do not agree wholeheartedly with the judgement of the Brahmin priest – student Shakuni?'

Devi looked at him, startled: Did he read her thoughts? Each word from the Prince opened up a new, strong emotion. What did he know about Shakuni at the court of Vidisha? And how? Had the caravan leaders of Taxila not told Father that Prince Ashoka was an embodiment of Shiva? Those clear eyes which pierced her soul and seemed to read all her thoughts! Honest, self-confident and strong-willed eyes! What kind of will-power? She did not understand how she could have been misled by the words of a lying priest.

Subhadra wanted to show Ashoka his stables of elephants and horses. Devi was given leave to join them. She loved animals and kept a close eye on the treatment of the animals by the stable boys. Ashoka was impressed by the cleanliness that was apparent everywhere in the buildings.

'My only child is greatly interested in the stables and their inmates,' declared Subhadra.

'They are thriving by it!' testified Ashoka.

The elephants seemed very receptive to Devi's words and her touch. One of the animals was kept apart. Ashoka went up to him, but Devi grabbed him by his arm.

'Sala is a dangerous animal! Do not get too close, O, Raja. Father wanted to have him put to death, but he is being kept here in a separate corner at my request. He is a beautiful animal, quick of gait and rides easily. But he had struck dead one of the stable boys with his trunk ...'

'Then, he treated him badly!'

'I do not know, but I mistrust him. He seems possessed by the soul of a vengeful Brahmin or a thoughtless tiger.'

Ashoka had already picked up a piece of sugar and now walked calmly towards the animal and offered it. Sala spied him with his small eyes, took the sugar carefully out of Ashoka's hand with his trunk, and bringing it up to his huge mouth, ate it up, sticking his trunk out for more. He got another piece. Then, the Prince stroked him softly on the trunk and whispered some

kind words. Friendship appeared to have been forged at once, to Devi's great surprise.

'Now I would also like to see your animals, if it pleases you, O, Raja,' she called out, delighted.

Ashoka took them to the camp and Devi was moved. The elephants trumpeted, while a few walked up to him, seeming extremely sensitive to his caresses; they turned their wise heads towards him. A whistle and five elephants came to him. Carefully and gently, they placed themselves in front of him, shaking their heads and waving their trunks.

'Why do those animals love you so much?' asked Devi, not feigning surprise.

'Because I love them as much. Animals are more trustworthy than people. They do not pretend and they are loyal friends as long as their trust is not betrayed. Look at Jampa over there who is spying on us so jealously. He never comes till I call him. He is nervous, stubborn and proud, but of a sweet nature, who never does anyone harm.' To the animal he then called: 'Jampa, come!'

Jampa came up calmly, stood right next to Ashoka and placed his trunk under Ashoka's arm.

'Greet Princess Devi, Jampa.' Jampa knelt down.

'Alright now! Go away, children!' Horses and elephants obediently went back to their places.

'Do you never punish them?' asked Devi.

'You do not punish your friends, do you? Needless harshness to animals is the worst way and its effects last a short time only. It may have its results now but it means nothing tomorrow on the contrary!'

'And if the friend is vicious, unruly and incorrigible?'

'Then, I free him of such a difficult life. Let him try to gather more good karma in another incarnation.'

'Do you have the right to take a life that Brihaspati has given?'

'That is for me to judge, to whom Brihaspati gave power and manas.'

'But if you use this power wrongfully, my Raja?'

'That, Shiva will determine when my good and evil is weighed. I act as my conscience tells me to.'

Devi looked at him with radiant eyes.

'If you love animals so much, you will be a good judge.'

‘No, I am a bad judge, because I disregard the laws.’

‘Why, O, Raja?’

‘They are not made for people but for varnas.’

Devi thought. Should she ask him ... How he, the ‘wild’ Prince, would

...

‘Sire, yesterday father had a stable boy, one whom I liked for his willingness and diligence. He was taken prisoner because he had said to others that he would create an accident for the new Viceroy. Would you judge him?’

‘Have the prisoner brought. We shall judge him according to human laws.’

A little later, a visibly upset man was brought in, pale and trembling. His hands were chained to his right leg. He kneeled before the Viceroy and bowed his head to the ground.

‘You wanted to place a piece of iron under my horse’s blanket, Salya. My horse would then rear in pain and throw me, thereby causing an accident! Why?’

All looked at Ashoka, alarmed. How did he know these things!

‘Sire, I listened to a Brahmin from Pataliputra telling my mistress many terrible things about you. He caught me, grabbed me by the neck and took me along. He wanted to know what I had overheard. He threatened to unmask me before Lord Subhadra, if I did not place a piece of iron under your horse’s rug. I had just heard what a bad man you were, O, Raja. And what is more, I had to swear that later I would not tell anyone who was responsible. And especially not the one who gave the orders, or else I would be born as a lowly worm, after first enduring hellish pain, because he was a Brahmin-priest, Sire. But that very night, a Vaishya merchant from the capital sought shelter in the stables. He knew about you and said you were the most noble of all persons in Pataliputra. You had saved a Vaishya’s life by killing an execution elephant with a single ray from your eye, and that you were responsible for many miracles. Then, I no longer wanted to commit the crime. But I did not dare to break my oath to the Brahmin. That is why, yesterday, I said to one of the stable boys that I wanted an accident to happen to the Viceroy. I knew that my liege would take me prisoner, and then I would no longer be able to carry out the evil plan. That is what happened, Lord ...’

‘Well, my beautiful Devi, this man has perhaps threatened the life of the Viceroy. He deserves to die. He is, after all, a Shudra. If he were a Vaishya, he would be fined heavily. The one who is really guilty, the Brahmin Shakuni, will not be punished at all.’ To the man, the Wild Prince said: ‘Salya, I free you now; here, I cut your bindings with my sword. And I ask your Lord, and the beautiful Devi, if you could be taken into my service. Then, you will be my stable boy, if you wish, and if your mistress is willing to lose such a good man.’



THE SHATTERED SERAI

Early the next morning, the servants and the animals stood ready, awaiting their travelling companions.

Ashoka had dressed himself carefully in a glistening white dress. His turban, of a rich fabric, was wound tightly around his black hair. Devi wore a very simple garment of snow-white material, covered by a veil of muslin. A female slave who rode alongside, placed a beautiful cashmere shawl over her bare shoulders, covering her breast, and, because of the cold morning mist, she then draped her with a precious Persian cloak. She was helped onto Sala's back. Ashoka rode Jampa. The others followed on horseback.

'Strength and beauty,' whispered Subhadra to his minister, Sunanda.

'The fierceness of Shiva and the nobility of Sita, so they say.'

'The first is slander by that silly young Brahmin.'

'The second was falsely reflected in his lustful eyes. Where was that vile guest going to, my Subhadra?'

'He was going to Ujjain, but he did not say for what reason. If it had been a pilgrimage, he would have visited the holy site of Sanchi. I fear he is no friend of the Viceroy's ...'

‘Of Prince Sumana, then ...’

‘Yes. Caravan leaders of Pataliputra have little good to say about Prince Sumana: a priest’s crony, a woman’s fool, a gambler, all understatements about him.’

‘And Prince Ashoka?’

‘A warrior. They say he drew and shot the Gandiwa, which was given to Arjuna by Varuna and he, who is capable of that, will one day become the ruler of India. The army looks at him as an incarnation of Shiva, the Righteous, who kills with a single ray from his eye.’

‘Such a peaceful land, Princess Devi. Ripening fields and forests, as beautiful as the Land of the Five-Rivers of the *Rig Veda*. Cows, sheep, and deer over there. Do you understand, Princess Devi, how a priest can ever take the life of these animals?’

‘But, O, Raja, you killed Madri of Mathura, because she did not want you!’ tried Devi, her voice quivering.

‘May Shiva’s lightning bolt strike me down, before I ever commit such a vile deed!’

‘You said, did you not, that she had to die because she did not want you!’

‘Yes. Shakuni’s guru, the priest Devaka, wanted her to become my wife, and forced Madri’s father into accepting his idea. In this way Devaka could have kept an eye on what I was doing. But she loved my best friend, Kala, the Prince of Mayula, and so refused. The following night Devaka killed her as punishment because she did not give in to the sacrificial priest.’

‘And you, my Raja ...’ Devi could barely speak because of her overpowering emotions.

‘I! I had let her ... free ...’ For a long time they rode silently. ‘Did you not want her as your wife?’ Devi asked after she had recovered from her emotions.

‘On the contrary, I let her free because Kala had more right to her: the right of reciprocal love.’ Again, they both remained silent for a while.

‘The flowers of Malwa bloom more beautifully today than other days, Sire, because the good and virtuous gaze of their new king floats over the fields and forests.’

‘I suspect that they open their buds and spread their colourful blossoms in tender loveliness, because the most beautiful Princess of all, Aryavarta, is on her way to the holy Sanchi.’

‘One of us is entangled by maya, O, Raja!’ A golden laugh trilled through the jungle, like the strings of the veena. Ashoka looked at her. His eyes glowed in delight. The mist had been swallowed up by the rays of the sun and the beautiful King’s daughter threw her warm cloak aside. Her smiling eyes were radiant, their brilliance enhancing her dark glowing beauty.

‘Malwa’s lovely nature gives you joy, Princess Devi.’

‘Yes, joy, my king! When my soul is happy, it welcomes all that is beautiful.’

‘Why is it happy?’

‘Do you know the feeling when everything in the world appears clouded by a shadow, when the glow is gone and beauty has lost its luster ... the feeling that evil triumphs over good because of injustice and deceit? When life reveals itself in sickness, ageing and death, in man, the evil, in animals, the suffering? And then the liberating word, my King. Maya!’

‘No, beautiful Princess, when evil triumphs I have the irresistible urge to strike it down. If good is oppressed because of injustice and deceit, I have the strong will to pursue and wrest justice, to drive out evil by attacking it, to alleviate suffering by destroying the cause. I shall use all the means, maybe, even strive for the unattainable. This is what my guru Kullika taught me. I understand your feelings and I could even have them myself if I would yield to sloth in my father’s gardens, float on lotus ponds with the slender beauties of the land in a boat with soft cushions, in lecherous, empty pleasures. Perhaps, even pity the harsh world around Pataliputra for its miserable fate. Before I met you in Vidisha, I thought I felt suffocated by the emptiness of royal pride, my Devi. Ujjain seemed like a musty temple, unreal, full of priestly intrigue and vapours from the blood of the animals whose lives have been snuffed out. Your father and his ministers taught me differently. I now feel happy again, straining for action and organisation. My blood flows in my veins once again and urges me happily back to work, towards what I deem necessary. When Kullika is in Ujjain, things will be right again. Maya is so important because maya rewards its creators! Every stroke of work tears one strand from maya’s strangling veil.’

‘Glorious, my King, when so much strength rests in one’s soul! I truly cheer when maya wanes, then it feels like liberation, and I grieve when her veil weighs heavy and wraps itself around life, like the dark green shroud around the pure white truth of the lotus. Well, then, my Prince ... Shakuni told me much about Pataliputra.’

‘I know; I also know what he said.’

‘You do?’

‘Certainly! How evil I was, and ugly and wild, and how good and handsome and calm my brother Sumana, and I, a danger to the Maharajah.’

‘My Raja, how do you know all this?’

Ashoka made a movement with his hand, declining to answer.

‘If I had not known, I would have been better off remaining in Pataliputra. Know that Sumana has tried to kill me twice, and Devaka thrice, all through others of course. Shakuni has now also made a half-hearted attempt. If I did not know such things beforehand! Understand, my beautiful Devi, that if they get in my way, I will destroy them.’

‘Lord, he travels ahead of you to Ujjain. Now I understand why! I wanted to warn you about his false testimonies and lies.’

‘Not necessary. I even know where he is now. He, who lies, deceives himself, not me.’

‘But how may one know that he is lying? I, too, believed him!’

‘Not any more?’ asked Ashoka, and in his eyes there shone a smile.

‘No!’ cried Devi, her whole being radiant.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I learned to know you, my Raja.’

‘And if I were deceitful?’

‘No, Lord, your eyes! They give me joy because of their truthfulness. The eyes of Shakuni brought me grief, because they lied.’

Ashoka did not turn his gaze away from her. The love which flowered in his being did not, however, lessen his suspicion. Was she genuine? Aradi had also suddenly been nice when he became army commander.

‘Shakuni strives for Sumana. That is his right,’ he retorted.

‘With false weapons!’

‘Otherwise, he will lose the battle.’

‘Even worse. What is it that makes you fight for the dangerous ivory throne of Pataliputra?’

‘The cries of the people and the Maurya! Sumana, following in the footsteps of Chandragupta and Bindusara, is like a jackal trailing the lions.’

Devi looked at him with admiration. Was that the true reason?

‘I now dare to tell you, my Raja: Shakuni called you ‘drunk with power’.’

‘Alright for me!’

‘But this will be a battle of life and death within your own house. Why don’t you turn your thoughts away from such a dangerous goal? Devote yourself to Malwa. That is a happy land. Ujjain means peace, while Pataliputra means strife, unrest, and murder. It is the cave of the tiger. I would not want to live there! I could not live there!’

‘And I would rather die and descend into the netherworld of Yama, the world of the Nagas, than to look on powerless, while the empire of my forefathers, their life’s work, dissolves, only because the trifling, lusty, gambling Sumana is the eldest son. For years I have thought and spoken about this with Father, with the wise Brahmin Sayana, with my guru Kullika. Nothing can change my decision anymore. Shiva wants it, Princess Devi!’

A silent Devi rode beside him. How could she have believed Shakuni for one moment! His admiration? Her vanity? Was it on this flawless, young king that the future well-being of Aryavarta rests? Would he be able to break the power of the mighty priesthood and thereby save the people that groan under their hand? How foolish of her to think she could keep him from doing what he saw as Shiva’s will! Who could call Ashoka ugly? The beautiful eyes that dominated his being, glittered like the most beautiful stars in the Indian night: the glow of the eternal Atman, life of the all-encompassing life, will of the All-will. ‘Drunk with power’! What a lie! It was the power of the sacred Power. Was he Shiva? And even as she had dared to offend him with her haughtiness, he did not hate her, nor destroy her!

The troops approached a clearing in the jungle. All of them dismounted. Servants cleared the ground and spread out blankets, put up tents to combat the sun’s glow, prepared meals and drinks, set out the fruits.

Devi looked around delightedly, drank in the floral splendour and fragrance coming from all sides. Her hands reached for a white jasmine and a golden vine, to blue lilies and red bandhujivas. Orchids, more beautiful than the most colourful butterflies, fluttering languorously from blossom to blossom, enticed her, while her dark eyes shone amidst the luxuriant beauty.

‘Careful, Princess Devi, cobras and ticks do not respect the foot that treads upon them.’

‘Oh, so much beauty has no room for cobra-temper and hate. I shall be careful and stamp on the ground.’ She picked an armful of flowers. Her laugh became more and more open, almost audacious. She walked up the path and threw the flowers at his feet. There, an ashoka-tree, whose blossoms were ready to burst. She stamped forcefully against the still tender trunk. Ashoka followed her, fearful of the dangers of the forest.

‘Hah! See, my Raja, its orange – red glow bursts out of the buds! There! There!’

Laughing happily, she pointed out to the young king the sparkling splendour of colours that was unfolding itself.

‘The ashoka-tree spreads its wealth of blossoms when a beautiful maiden touches its trunk, and so it proves your beauty, Princess Devi.’

‘Ashoka-tree! Is it vain of me, my King. No, it is my happiness. I am happy that the false thoughts, the maya, have been stripped from my soul. It is happiness, heightened by the emotion of all this beauty!’

‘Well, then, there are two Ashokas who were touched by one beautiful woman. The first one spreads its fiery blossoms out at the first tread of her foot; the other, dark and ugly, trembles for her life.’ The Prince laughed.

‘Oh no, the one was like the other: dark and cold, until my clumsy thoughtlessness trampled him, and then his being unfolded the fiery blossoms of his inner beauty. For that, I thank you, my King. You were more sympathetic to a guilty, insignificant, thoughtless, little Princess than she deserved.’

Suddenly, he stamped powerfully with his right foot on the ground, grabbed Devi in his strong arms and lifted her up as high as he could, bending over to her. Without her noticing, he had shattered the head of a cobra with his foot. Devi did not see how the body of the dangerous snake was still twisting around his leg and later collapsed in the flowery grass.

She blushed deeply, threw her arm around his strong neck for support. Then, Ashoka set her down and kissed her deeply.

‘Do you love me, Devi?’

‘And if I don’t love you, my King?’ she laughed at him.

‘Then, I will let you go and say that I lifted you up because a *serai*¹ was getting ready to kill you. Look, over there!’

Frightened, Devi looked at the dead snake and her beautiful figure nestled deeper in his arms.

‘Was that why ...’

‘No, you will be my wife, because you are the first that loves me for myself. You will go with me to Ujjain! Say yes!’

Devi held his head between her hands and kissed his eyes.

‘They are the most beautiful, because they reflect your inner self, my Ashoka. Father will decide.’

The engagement was quickly sealed and caused great joy. The happy noise attracted two pilgrims who had visited the sacred Narmada and Mount Amarakanta², the peak of the immortals, and who had left Sanchi a little earlier.

‘What brings this party so much joy?’ asked one of them. ‘The daughter of our Lord Subhadra has just been betrothed to ...’

The priest was not even listening any longer. He walked directly over to Subhadra: ‘Do you want a priest, Lord, who can bless the engagement of your daughter immediately? Sacrificial animals may be had from a Vaishya living nearby.’

‘What are the charges requested by the honourable priests?’

‘Two of your best horses, Lord, that can take us back to Pataliputra. Our pilgrimage is finished; all that remains is the long journey back to the capital.’

‘I shall ask my daughter’s betrothed. He must decide if an offering is to be performed now.’

‘You know, Devi, that I hate the sacrifice of animals.’

‘Tell them then, my dear Raja.’

Ashoka walked up to both men.

‘No, honourable Brahmins, no animals will be sacrificed at our betrothal ceremonies.’

‘Do you belong to the heathen sect of Buddhists or Jains?’

‘I do not owe you an explanation; I have not asked you to come here.’

The priests were angry at losing easy earnings.

‘Do you not need the support of the gods in your marriage?’

‘That will surely not depend on your mediation because you will not be the ones to bless my marriage,’ said Ashoka calmly.

Trembling, Devi held tightly to his arm, while she whispered to him: ‘Do not play with our happiness!’

The priest burst out angrily: ‘You dare to offend a Brahmin, while your betrothed stands next to you? Brihaspati will pass by your house and Varuna avoid it, thoughtless young man! And I, Brahmin-priest, curse you: This Princess will never become your wife!’

Devi burst out in tears, but Ashoka walked to the Brahmin: ‘Your curse is worthless, priest, because I do not believe in your sanctity, and Shiva, Lord of Destruction, will soon send a tiger on your path that will kill you with one smite of its paw and eat your guilty flesh. You will be reborn immediately as a miserable dirty dog in a village of Shudras, because you committed a mortal sin: cursing in rage! Leave my camp immediately! I am the Viceroy of Ujjain, Prince Ashoka of Pataliputra!’

Both priests were startled on hearing the feared name, and left the army site haughtily. They quickly went up the road that the troops had just left. Ashoka laughed when they had disappeared from sight.

Visibly upset, Devi asked, ‘Do you not fear the curse of the Brahmin, my Raja?’

‘Of course not. Dry your tears, my dear Devi, the great Brahmin Sayana says that no one can know beforehand what will happen in the future. At the university in Takshasila they taught me that all events occur in a chain of cause and effect, in which no one can interfere arbitrarily, not even this Brahmin. Should I then fear unscrupulous priests who, eager for lucre, curse all who do not allow themselves to be extorted?’

‘Dushanta forgot his Shakuntala because of a priest’s curse, my Prince!’

‘They themselves devised that story and inflict themselves on unlettered ignorant people as the providers of salvation, which is not coming anyway, or as the cause of calamities, which come in spite of them. They are like the tree’s greedy offshoots, which sucks up the precious sap from the trunk and keep the fruitful wood from spreading its blessing. One day, when the time

is ripe, they will be cut away with a hard hand ... if the tree will just survive it!’

Devi had recovered to some extent by the time they arrived at Sanchi, although fear still lingered in her heart. She hurried to the vihara of the wise Brahmins, who revered Subhadra and his beautiful daughter.

‘My wise Sudeva, the Viceroy of Ujjain, Raja Ashoka, my fiancé, wishes to know if you are doing well, if you have enough food and pure water, and collect many spiritual treasures by pious work.’

‘May Indra and Varuna bless the son of the holy Maharajah in whose land peace and prosperity rule, my Devi. And Malwa will consider itself lucky to welcome Sayana’s friend as viceroy. Does the young couple wish to have their betrothal solemnised at our vihara? It would be a great honour for us.’

‘I regret, not, highly revered Sudeva. Our happiness would grow and flower like nature after the rains, if our betrothal will be blessed by priests who are friends of Sayana. But I cannot forget my dearly beloved purohita, Kullika, who was my guru.’

‘That is very understandable, high Raja. Enter our vihara and rest for a while from the journey to our sacred Sanchi. Our highly honoured friend Subhadra will not be happy that his only child is being taken away from the palace.’

‘We Aryans are joyful when sons are born and when our daughters marry men of esteem.’

‘Pilgrims from Pataliputra told us that the Brahmin Kullika, Sayana’s pupil, had become ill during his journey.’

‘I am happy to tell you that he has recovered, highly revered Sudeva. He will come to Ujjain soon. For a long time he was a guest at a Buddhist monastery.’

‘And he did not suffer any harm to his soul?’ laughed Sudeva.

‘He was not there for his soul, but to heal his body of a serious illness. What harm could befall his soul, venerable Sudeva?’

‘That he would turn to Buddha’s heresy.’

‘Why heresy?’

‘Because the Brahmin seeks only the release of his own soul, within the circle of the twice-born, and with stubborn self-interest, he sees in his own welfare the welfare of the Aryans. What is outside that circle is accursed.

The Buddha, on the contrary, teaches that in the welfare of the whole lies one's own well-being and that he who enhances the happiness of each human being, each animal, each living being, receives in turn happiness and the liberation of his own soul. The Brahmin's goal is the personal welfare of his cloistered sacred sect; the Buddha's is the encompassing happiness of all that lives.'

'But that cannot be heresy, my Sudeva! *Tat Tvam Asi*. Vasudeva says that Buddhism will die like the beauty of a glorious flower in the jungle night. What stops us from picking that flower and carrying it to Pataliputra, where its beauty can blossom in the eyes of the people?

Who was Buddha, venerable Sudeva?'

A smile, descending from the highest Atman, emerged on the face of the revered gray-haired old man.

'Many years ago, was born to the Shakyas in Kapilavastu a child, who had all the marks of a great human being ...'

For the first time, Ashoka heard the history of the rich Prince Siddhartha: How he became a mendicant monk, how, as Gautama the Buddha, he started his work of liberating the people from the oppressive shackles that Brahmanism forged around Aryavarta, and how he revealed the sacred and noble eight-fold path for each human being, longing for the blissfulness of Nirvana.

'Does it mean that Gautama Buddha teaches an individual after-life in Nirvana, venerable Sudeva?'

'Buddha would answer: A man is struck by a poisoned arrow. His friends call a doctor. Should he then say: I will not have the arrow pulled out before I know who the killer is, what his name is, from which clan he sprung forth, to which varna he belonged, what he looked like, big or small, dark or fair, where his birthplace is, which kind of bow he had and of which wood and from which hide the tendon is made and which poison used? Then, the victim would be dead before he could be saved. Buddha did not come to answer unsolvable questions, but to help the miserable mankind. What to a materialist means 'to be', is merely 'becoming' for the Buddha. 'True being' lies on the other shore, in Nirvana. Buddha showed the path.'

'Which path, my Sudeva?'

'The path of the pure, all-pervading, all-encompassing love, the noble feeling of kindness for all that breathes; that is the liberating power.

Considerate behaviour to all and so are: compassion, loving kindness, sharing in joy and equanimity. All these four are equal; the four sublime states, spreading out in four directions. In Varanasi, he set the wheel of the Dharma in motion. For forty-five years, Gautama the Buddha walked through Magadha, his alms-bowl under the arm, teaching, where people asked for his teachings, comforting where solace was needed, striving where his striving was required, so doing what is good, wishing what is good.'

'Good for whom, Sudeva?'

'For all that lives, for Aryan and Mletsha, for poor and rich, men and women.'

'You say: Women, Sudeva?'

'Any woman can become an arhat, just like any man. The right thought, the right word, the right deed, that is Buddha. The true disciple keeps the right way of life, not because it is needed for his own development but because, by its harmony, it serves the welfare of all living creatures. Such is the teaching of Buddha!'

'Then, what new doctrine did Buddha proclaim?'

Sudeva hesitated a moment.

'Not a new doctrine. India suffocates under doctrines. The Buddha showed the path. What is new is his all-encompassing humanity and love for all that lives, which nowadays is buried in the incomprehensible Vedas, the Brahmanas and Upanishads and not understood anymore. The great Buddha himself is his doctrine: the living, loving human being.'

'But what is the purpose of opening a path, my Sudeva, which only a few of the millions, though from all castes, may follow!'

Sudeva did not understand him; he did not know what was going on in the young King. He felt his questioning was a manifestation of an interest for something new that he did not know.

'Yet, this is the striving of the Tathagata, honoured Raja. Normally, one travels a path with a goal, to reach a goal. For the Buddha, the road is the goal, Nirvana the last step.'

The other hermits then brought in refreshments of fresh water, which had been cooled in earthen pots, and fruits.



GANDHARVA IN SANCHI

Devi had not uttered a word during the discussions between Ashoka and Sudeva. She had listened in astonishment to his questions. She understood immediately the intention of his last question: the cries of the peoples.

‘Come, my Devi, you wanted to show me the holy sites in Sanchi.’

Devi led him to the places where holy Brahmins had performed their miracles. Ashoka, however, was more concerned about her and her obvious sadness. He placed a protective arm around her and said: ‘My Devi is downcast by the curse of the vile Brahmin priest.’

She nodded. Once again the tears welled up in her eyes.

‘But the power of the curse exists only in legends: Shakuntala, King Nala! I would like to know how many of the curses of the Brahmin-court have fallen on me, like the leeches on a traveller in a moist jungle. They have never hurt me!’

‘You are a strong person, my Ashoka, whose spirit overpowers their much weaker minds. Their karma, their varna, gives them a power which I cannot grasp or fathom.’

‘And what if this Princess never became my wife?’ He took her in his arms and a wondrous and overwhelming feeling of happiness and

protectiveness shook his being.

‘Then, I would want to die. For I have known the most beautiful that ever crossed my path.’

‘The most beautiful, my Devi?’

A dark blush suffused her face. ‘And the highest, my beloved Raja. The justice in the human being, the gentleness in the power, the truth in the seeker—all of it in your gaze. If I never become your wife,’ she continued, slowly, as if measuring each word, ‘that will still be a beacon for me until I die. The curse of a Brahmin permeates the whole being. My faith in their Vedas has weakened; I am drawn towards Buddha’s vision that opens the possibility of becoming an arahat as much for a woman as for a man. But my fear of their spiritual power has not become less. That is why I want to stay with you for as long as I can. You are stronger than them and I am not. If I do not become your wife, I wish to be your betrothed, as long as ...’

Ashoka embraced her, kissed her. Then, he whispered: ‘Nothing will take my Devi away from me. No brutal Brahmin curse, nor separation. Just as Dushanta took Shakuntala as his wife, I will take my beloved. Now, at this moment, I take Devi of the *Setti*¹ varna as my wife ... *Gandharva* marriage ... no priest or even he must concede to this divine right, even according to the revealed scriptures. Here is my ring, my Devi! Do you trust me?’

Devi looked at him with a mysterious smile, which one knows but never understands, because it is the key to the secret of future days.

‘Completely, my sorrow-free² man.’

As they walked back to the hermitage, fondly embracing each other, Ashoka said:

‘Do you still believe in the Brahmin curse?’

‘That is impossible, my King. After all, I am your wife!’ They laughed like children, completely carefree.

As the King and his wife — now seated together on one elephant— and the rest of the entourage departed, the anchorites followed, speechless. Finally, the visitors disappeared into the distance. Sudeva moved his hand softly over his forehead, again and again.

‘It is amazing how the spark of the Atman kindles in a few souls so clearly; while in others, smolders for an entire life-time and does not even spread a glimmer of light. Seven sharp questions —the whole history of

Gautama the Buddha. But the eighth: What is the purpose? Yes, what is the purpose: Happiness of the individual, his own ultimate welfare ... Brahmins! What is the purpose for the young King, who has to fight battles, and judge and punish, rule, kill! He cannot walk the path, at least not until another life.'

'Perhaps, because the welfare of millions is dearer to him than his own salvation.'

'But he is not a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, is he? He is a warrior!' Sudeva called out, annoyed.

'Be calm, my Sudeva! For which purpose is Ashoka a warrior?'

'For the power of a Maharajah!'

'Perhaps, you underestimate him, my Sudeva.'

'And for his pleasures and lusts. You form too high an estimate of him. Devi told me that she just had married him.'

'Gandharva?'

'Yes, gandharva! As is customary among the unscrupulous Kshatriyas.'

'Perhaps, you regard him too little in this as well, Sudeva. If we want the truth of the Buddha, then we will have to discard the rigid dogma of our varna, which only looks at our own birth and our own salvation.'

The company of the young Raja had almost reached Vidisha. In front of them walked a pilgrim. When the troupe neared, he moved to one side of the road, kneeled and bowed deeply with his hands raised before the King.

'That is one of the two priests!' whispered Devi, alarmed. Ashoka had them halt.

'Where is your friend Lambama, Balabha?' The priest was startled.

'Sire, when we continued our journey after leaving your camp, my fellow-traveller was very restless. Anxiously, he watched either side of our path. He feared your curse would be fulfilled and was not yet ready to give up this earthly existence. I comforted him by saying that a curse from ...'

'From a Shudra, say it, priest!'

'... from a Shudra, had no meaning for us, because we are Brahmins. After having travelled a long way, at a pace faster than was good for us, suddenly, near an opening in the woods, we came upon a tiger, crouching on its haunches. I remained standing still, but my friend was so frightened that he turned to flee as fast as he could. At the same time, the tiger leapt on

him, brought him down and, tearing into him, ate him up. Sire, be merciful to Lambama that he will not be reborn as a yellow-haired Shudra-dog.'

'You tell me which incarnation he deserves, that Shiva can approve of, Balabha.'

The priest looked at Ashoka, shocked and bewildered, and bowed once again in the dust.

'Sire, he deserved what you decreed him, but punish with a rebirth as a Vaishya, so that he can learn diligence, modesty, simplicity and benevolence!'

'Good, Balabha, your wish will be fulfilled!' Ashoka gave orders to resume the march. For a long time, the Brahmin remained in his devout position.

'My beloved Raja, how did you know they were called Lambama and Balabha?'

'I know the priests of the Brahmin-court by name,' laughed Ashoka.

'And will the other be reborn as Vaishya?'

'I know that even less than Balabha, my beautiful wife. Let the fool believe it. It harms neither him nor me. It gives him joy, and me, harmless amusement.'

Devi held her delicate hand out to him. He held on to it and so they rode on silently for some time.

'Can you have anyone you want, killed, my great King?'

'Until now, I have had to do it myself, and my chakra never errs. My spell on the wretch was mockery, his death pure coincidence. Only, your father had told me the number of tigers in Malwa had increased alarmingly.'

'Buddha does not want one to kill living beings.'

'I am not a follower of Buddha, my beloved Devi. I understand now that I would betray India and the Mauryas if I converted to the teachings of Buddha. Only I have the power to save both. The Buddha came for those who wanted to liberate themselves from the suffering of the endless cycle of births and not for those who wanted to liberate all, by putting an end to sufferings. It is not of importance to me whether I will be liberated or attain Nirvana but whether I can free the people of Aryavarta from their mental slavery and pathetic fear of phantoms under which they groan like the desert under Surya's rays during Jyeshtha, like the plains of the Ganga under the floods that the Maruts hurl upon her, like the jungle under the

suffocating smoke of a forest fire. Why is a Shudra, a Chandala, the whole of mankind west of the Sarasvati, accursed from their birth? I shall attempt to remove this curse, if need be with my chakra, my sword, battle carts, and warriors. I do not know from where I came, I do not know where I will go, my Devi. But I do know for what purpose I was born. Sumana, the Brahmin-court, the peoples, will bow to my will. I know from experience what I may expect of them. No yoga, no truth of suffering, no eight-fold path, no Buddha, will be of help with that.'

'But all that is fighting with maya, delusions, my great Raja!'

'... Maya which suffocates the truth, that tramples justice, that humiliates people, and reduces them to creatures less than a bird, which can at least spread its wings and fly to freedom.'

'But my beloved, Brahmanism wants to stand alone. The only thing that binds it is the hate for all that is not Aryan. Buddhism, however, is the collective obedience to the Buddha, united by compassion in an atmosphere of love, in which the Shudra is as welcome as the Brahmin, and fits in as well. Why do Sayana and Vasudeva find fault about the number of sects in which Buddhism has splintered, when you can look up to the great man, Buddha, who renounced a life of wealth, pleasures and carefree existence, to choose the most wretched way of life: begging for alms with a bowl, in order to show people the way to his noble goal. Sects mean: intolerance and unkindness of people. That is precisely what the Buddha wanted to eradicate, also against that half of humankind: the women. Each cursed his birth, his life. The Buddha has shown that each incarnation can be a step forward towards Nirvana, thus happiness. For every one. The Buddha praised life as a great joy, a privilege. Let us acknowledge that the Buddha has proved too weak for the entrenched habit: to conform oneself to the sacrificial priests of the Brahmins.'

'Say that again, my dear Devi! You, a woman, just opened up a new vista in the wildly overgrown jungle. Is that true? Has the Buddha proved too weak: Powerlessness against the almighty sacrificial priests?'

'We, the inhabitants of our sacred India, suffocate under the pressure of a dissolution, in which an unscrupulous, selfish priesthood has seized power and we yearn for the freedom of the eternal alignment to the godliness and humaneness of the Buddha: that is Brahman ... that is Atman.'

Ashoka looked at her with astonished eyes.

‘Devi, my darling, from where did this thought come to you! Freedom ... the alignment with humanity ... Revelations breathed out through the Atman ... *Tat Tvam Asi* ... Kullika!’ A darker flush coloured his young face, his eyes glittered. Devi looked with admiration at her god.

‘You will go with me to Pataliputra, if the gods call me. You will be the guiding light, the first queen in the anthapura, and my counsel!’

‘I do not know, my King, if I am capable of that. I am not suited for fighting against harshness, intrigues, deceit ... They strike down at me. Brothers’ strife and hatred do not awaken my resistance, but rather destroy my resilience.’

‘But I stand at your side, my Devi!’



SADAVAHA'S SOUL ON MOUNT KAILASHA

The entourage neared Vidisha. Word of Ashoka's marriage reached all the houses, like a bird's first call in the morning through the jungle. The residents approached them, arms and baskets filled with flowers, and as cheers of 'Hail Ashoka, Hail Devi!' echoed, the people joyfully threw flowers before the legs of the elephant that carried the young couple to Subhadra's palace. After all, with this marriage, the young Viceroy of Ujjain became more closely bound to their city. The swelling mass of people, all dressed in festive white, which contrasted with the flaming red of their shawls and stoles, moved through the streets towards the palace of their Lord who belonged to the respected Setti Varna. Everyone brought gifts for Ashoka and Devi: ivory carvers brought boxes of the most flawless ivory, upon which hands had artistically carved figures from old legends. Furniture-makers brought chests made of teak of finest grains, which lavishly depicted, on all sides, scenes from the *Mahabharata*. Goldsmiths gifted the couple with bowls of deep gold on which their gods were depicted next to the people from India. Ashoka, who had seen a lot of western art in Taxila, was surprised at the work of these people; he was, at

the same time, overjoyed. This was no alien art but rather, skill and taste, flourishing in its own land.

‘That is beautiful, Samgata,’ said Ashoka to the leader of the ivory carvers. ‘But one can see in Vidisha so many works of art from Egypt, Syria, Macedonia, and Iran.’

‘Their gods, O, Raja, are far removed from their people, in beauty and standing. Ours are our fathers, our family, our elephants, our deer, our chiefs and kings.’

‘Are they better, Samgata?’

‘They are closer to us, Lord.’

‘When you come to Ujjain, I will gift you works of art and beauty from other distant lands.’

‘Your most beautiful gift will be your leadership, Mighty King.’

‘That, you will have to see yet, Samgata.’

‘Many caravans from Taxila journey through Vidisha, Sire.’

‘What is it they expect from me, my beautiful Devi?’

‘You, yourself, and that makes them happy!’

At that moment, messengers approached the Viceroy, including one from Pataliputra.

‘Sire, the Viceroy of Taxila has left for the West with a large army. Sela reports that the right warriors have been taken along. With those left behind, Sela has established two temples: one for Indra and one for Shiva.’

‘Is it disappointing news that makes my Raja so serious?’

‘On the contrary, it is what I expected and what I wished for, my Devi.’ Even amidst the excitement of the festivities he did not forget for a moment his purpose, sensed the mood of the people and felt they were not unkindly disposed.

Barely had the company returned to Subhadra’s palace—where Ila and a number of Brahmins, merchants, and some of the Maharajah’s high court officers waited to welcome and congratulate the young couple—when a Vanaprasthi from a neighbouring hermitage, who was renowned through all of India for his fortune telling, entered the gallery with the confidence of a man of the highest varna. Everyone made room for the venerable and feared old man, Sadvaha, who, without responding to the accolades of the others, walked straight up to the young newlyweds.

‘Mighty King, Viceroy of Ujjain, and his betrothed Devi, daughter of the chief of the government in Vidisha and descendent of the revered Setti varna ... I, as Brahmin, to whom the highest wisdom of the four Vedas and Brahmanas has been revealed, will give you counsel at the solemn moment, when you will make decisions about the marriage ceremony.’ The younger ones of the celebrants felt embarrassed and disquieted; the older ones kept fixed, frozen faces.

‘For the day of the wedding, I have, by much observation of the stars and the position of the moon and the planets, determined the best day to be the third day of the second coming full moon. Try to find priests as quickly as possible for your sacrifices, so that the preparations can take place without offending even one of the gods. I shall be pleased to help you.’

Devi looked around in fear, then up to her beloved, who had remained unaffected. A deathly silence fell upon the gallery. No one dared to interrupt Sadvaha, because each feared an outburst of rage or of curses, which they did not wish for the Subhadras. After all, they were highly esteemed and loved far and wide. It was Prince Ashoka who was the only one listening dispassionately to the words of the astrologer. He then spoke:

‘We thank you, pious Sadvaha, for your interest in our fate. But Devi and I have been united this day, in what is acknowledged by Manu’s law, a Gandharva marriage.’

A look of indignation was thrown upon the calm Viceroy.

Those present were aghast but Ashoka understood that the priest was merely trying to regain his composure.

‘You know this form of marriage is the least approved by the Brahmins.’

‘I know and I understand it, too, honourable Sadvaha. But on the way to Sanchi, the Brahmin Balabha from Pataliputra meant to strike me down with the curse that Devi would never become my wife. My fiancée was so shaken and dismayed by this premature pronouncement of the enraged priest that I immediately arranged our marriage to restore her joy and trust, which Balabha had destroyed with his foul mouth.’

‘And do you not fear the wrath of Balabha, the priest, Viceroy of Ujjain?’ asked Sadvaha, who had grown even more disconcerted and insolent.

‘Of course not, pious Sadvaha,’ replied Ashoka clearly and steadily. ‘I told Balabha that I did not believe in the power of his curse and that Shiva would send a tiger onto his path that would pounce upon him and eat him up for his mortal sin: cursing in rage.’

‘Your curse lacks divine sanction, Sire, because you are not a priest. Why did you not try to assuage the effects of the Brahmin’s curse by bringing great sacrifices?’

‘Unnecessary! Balabha’s friend, Lambama, just told me that the tiger did, as bidden, his duty obediently. Balabha is dead, eaten.’

A great outcry arose in the gallery, until Sadvaha began again, though his demeanour had lost all self-assuredness.

‘Do you wish to take heed of my prediction, king and queen of Ujjain?’

‘Is your intention to proclaim your own knowledge or that which the Brahmin, Shakuni, has charged you with a week ago? There is no need of the latter, because I am already familiar with it.’

Sadvaha stood stunned, his face turning ashen. Pearls of sweat dripped down his face. Murmuring whispers swept through the rows of visitors. The priest could hardly get the words out of his mouth: ‘Sire ... how do you know all these things?’

‘Pray to Shiva, the god of the immaculate mountain, and Parvati, born of the mountain, who reside on the white Mount Kailasha, the gods of salutary and happiness-bringing truth. Perhaps then you, too, will know, Brahmin priest!’

Sadvaha fell to his knees, raised high his hands, brought them together and bowed down in an arch. And as though everyone had been waiting for it, they followed Sadvaha in his tribute to the new Raja, who possessed human gifts of such greatness that they had to be acknowledged as divine.

The rumours about Ashoka’s marriage in Vidisha quickly grew into a legend: In the forest of Sanchi, the gods themselves had united Devi and Ashoka in marriage, but before that, Agni had taken on the form of a tiger and had waited to kill Balabha and then took his soul to a settlement of Shudras. There, he was born again as a yellow-haired Shudra -dog. His curse had power no more and the marriage was consecrated in divine splendour. Balabha, now a Shudra -dog, had however hunted down Sadvaha, and ordered him to forecast lies so disagreeable as to make the young couple unhappy. But King Ashoka, incarnation of Shiva, and thus

all-knowing, had taken the soul out of Sadvaha and sent it to Mount Kailasha, where it lies—stretched out naked—in the cold icy fields, to freeze the lies out of him and then burn into him the truth. Only then will Sadvaha be allowed to foretell the future once again. Stretched out on the ground of his hermitage, mute, his body now awaits the return of his soul.



SILENCE, SANHITA!

‘Vasumitra, have you forsaken our house? Or, are there more beautiful hetaere¹ in Ujjain?’

‘Neither, beautiful Virasena. My honoured father has urgent affairs and drives my brother and me as though we were despicable slaves. He says that work is the most desirable offering to the gods.’

‘That is an auspicious sign for the mercantile houses of our beautiful Ujjain. However, it is my yearning that the *sarthavahas*² are in less of a hurry than the merchants so that drudgers like Vasumitra can come and rest at my house once in a while.’

‘How are Kokali and Nandabala and Kesina and Sanhita? Offer me some refreshment as only Virasena can mix.’

Vasumitra was welcomed with great joy. Everyone did their best to praise the rich merchant’s son for coming, and bemoan the fact that he was so busy. An easy chair of ebony, covered with a beautiful tiger skin, was placed before him.

‘If you spoil me like this, I will not be able to leave, Kokali. And my father does not jest when it comes to work.’

‘Work, work. Why must a man with your wealth still have to work? Leave that to the priests,’ said Sanhita. Everyone laughed, except Virasena.

She pointed stealthily at a traveller who sat some distance away from them.

‘Who is that stranger who is being caressed and petted by Nandabala?’ asked Vasumitra.

‘Oh, that is a handsome young Brahmin from Pataliputra, Shakuni, a traveller or pilgrim, who is here for his pleasure or business, or for a journey beside the holy Narmada, I don’t know why he has come. He seems to be rich, is not miserly and seeks the company of Brahmins and the merchants. Garga is visiting Sinka, and now Nandabala is amusing the stranger for the time being.’

‘Send them to us, Kokali. The more the pilgrims, the more joy it brings to the gods.’

The company around Vasumitra grew, for the rich merchants of Ujjain tasted the pleasures of Virasena’s house daily, where the most beautiful hetaere, the rarest drinks, the choicest food and the most exquisite care, was offered to the guests, all keenly watched and supervised by Virasena.

‘Well, Puru. You look like a tiger that has choked on a deer. What unpleasant news do you have for us?’ mocked Vasumitra at a merchant who had just come.

‘The new King ...’ He began before being interrupted.

‘Enough about the new King. No one talks of anything else but the terror of Pataliputra. Sanhita, tell me something more cheerful.’

‘Yes, Lord, but the new King comes ...’

‘We know that he is coming, and he is such a great warrior that he can swallow Sanhita in one bite. That is, if I do not first lock him up in our treasury where the walls are five arms thick,’ mused Garga aloud.

‘Garga does not seem too fond of the new King. I am. I like people who are never scared and thus do not play dirty tricks behind the backs of others,’ declared Sanhita.

‘Every merchant knows why he is coming to Ujjain. Till now our trade was free from being taxed, if we were on friendly terms with the mahamatra of the taxes. With the coming of Raja Ashoka, our golden period will come to an end,’ complained Garga.

‘I do not approve of palace officers who act on their own. The Emperor must be seen to reign, if trade is to bloom,’ said Vasumitra.

‘Prince Ashoka thinks only of his own interests and the merchants of Ujjain will have to open wide their treasure trove for the greedy Prince,’

said Shakuni.

‘Do you know the viceroy, Shakuni?’ asked Vasumitra.

‘Better than his own father knows him.’

‘The caravan leaders of Taxila praise him highly!’

‘Of course. He conspired with the rebellious Taxilans, because the Emperor did not dare to send a large army with him. He had no choice but presenting himself as a friendly, respectable commander of the imperial army. Emperor Bindusara had him recalled because he was being praised too much and instead, sent the Crown Prince with a large army.’

‘Strange, that the Emperor risked sending a large army along with the Crown Prince.’

‘Naturally, Garga, Prince Sumana after all is the Yuvaraja, and a faithful follower of the Brahmins.’

‘They say that besides the Brahmins, Prince Sumana loves beautiful women, gambling, and other pleasures.’

‘Why did the Maharajah then not send him here!’ cried Virasena.

Everyone laughed.

‘First, you would have to endure the commander who will, with a heavy hand, force all of you to pay high taxes. If he becomes too dangerous, then Prince Sumana will come in his stead as the viceroy.’

‘Dangerous to whom, Shakuni?’ asked Puru.

‘To the Maharajah. Prince Ashoka is a danger to the Maharajah. They even wanted to make him the King in Taxila, so that they could secede from the holy Maharajah. He will try that here, too. And the consequences: war, hate, anger of the gods, triumph of the unholy, disaster over the world empire of the Emperor Bindusara, not to speak of drought, floods, pestilence and famine, with which the gods punish a defiant mankind.’

‘Why does the Maharajah put up with him then?’

‘Why does one tolerate tigers in the jungle, the Apsaras in the heaven, the Dasyus in the atmosphere?’

‘How large is the army that he commands?’

‘A handful. He cannot use soldiers from Pataliputra as they are loyal to the Maharajah and to the heir to the throne. He will wish to organise his own army here, one that will follow him.’

‘We have no fear of a royal noble who has no army,’ boasted Garga.

‘His wildness is larger than that of an army, his daring greater than that of all of Ujjain, his will more powerful than that of the kingdom that he will rule ... if you do not strengthen yourselves.’

‘A powerful king is beneficial to trade and prosperity!’ remarked Vasumitra.

‘How shall we go about it, Brahmin?’ continued Garga.

‘What do I know of your abilities?’

‘You know that dangerous viceroy.’

‘Well then, bind him.’

‘With ropes?’ mocked Vasumitra.

‘No. First, with a woman, one who belongs to you, who is loyal to you and does not flinch from his ugliness. At least, then you will know what he is up to. Make certain that his good projects fail and his bad ones succeed. After all, it was his cunning that won over Taxila.’

‘How do we prevent that here?’

‘The more riches you send him, the more power he will achieve over you and the Maharajah.’

‘Go on, Brahmin.’

‘Power in his hand is worse than a lion in a cattle yard, than Mara³ in the temple, than the Mlecchas⁴ in the hermitage.’

‘Who must take care of that, Shakuni?’ asked Garga impatiently.

‘It is you who are rich and know well the Emperor’s road but also the roads that are not his. Each caravan that you divert far from Ujjain, reduces his revenue. Moreover, with your riches you can influence the peoples of the West. I will help you, if you want.’

‘Talking of inciting!’ laughed Sanhita, ‘Who was it who was inciting the people?’

‘Silence, Sanhita! What do you hope to gain, Brahmin, when stir up the far western territories against the rightful viceroy?’ interjected Vasumitra, getting involved in the discussions. ‘Malwa is wrecked by deceit and falsehood. If the Viceroy puts an end to that, he will be a blessing to the country.’

‘Nothing to be gained, Vasumitra. All who are Brahmins in Madhyadesa hate the Wild Prince, who respects neither the gods nor the priests and who wants to violate the sacred laws of the land, to defile and take over, and thus

control our sacred Aryavarta. The Crown Prince is noble, pious and good-natured, and he is wild, rough and feared.'

'Let him be wild and feared as long as he brings law and order to the government.'

'But Shakuni, why are you interfering? The Maharajah decides, doesn't he, about who commands the army and who is to be the heir. So I have heard,' remarked Sanhita.

'Silence, Sanhita!'

'It seems it is out of fear that the Emperor favours the wild warrior, Ashoka, my Sanhita.'

'Please! Silence! Sanhita, sing, and don't talk of palace matters, it is not fitting for women.'

'Thank you for your reprimand, highly honoured Puru. But this much I do understand: that Shakuni is inciting you, clever men, against the new viceroy, who is beginning to look ever better to me.'

Loud uproarious laughter rose from the group.

'You will be reborn as a minister, Sanhita!'

But Vasumitra patted her on the shoulder: 'Your words are right, beautiful Sanhita.'

Sanhita took her veena, played a melody, and ceased to listen any further to the discussions between the rich merchants of Ujjain and Shakuni. That afternoon they would gather in a park that belonged to the rich Garga, along the road to Bhopala. Some other merchants and Brahmins were also invited. The courtesans were allowed to heighten the festive mood. When all had left Virasena's house, Revata came out from behind a thin wall, from where he had followed all that had transpired. He paid Virasena a *nishka* for her help and Sanhita a golden *masha*⁵.

'Every true piece of information about Shakuni is worth its value in gold to me, Virasena. Do not forget that I know the viceroy well. That could be of use to you.'

After he had found out where Garga's park was, he left by the rear of the house and went up the road to Bhopala. After a few hours, he went to Garga's gardener and, with a bribe of a piece of gold, took on the temporary role of a garden help. Thus, he was able to overhear what was plotted, how they would try to get Kunti, Puru's sister, who was a vain and proud girl, into Ashoka's house as a spy. Also, which of the caravan routes in the west

of Malwa they would use in the future, in order to escape Ashoka's officers. He also learned how the Bhils, the Maharattas, the Rajputs, and other tribes would be incited against the viceroy, to intensify the agitation in Malwa. This last, Shakuni would take upon himself, and he would depend on the support of the wealthy merchants. Then, Revata thought it better to continue on the road to Bhopala because he was expecting his Lord today. He still had an hour to proceed before he would spot the body of riders approaching. He positioned himself erect, in full view beside the road, a sign that he wished to speak to Ashoka. The King stopped and Revata rode alongside him as he narrated, in exactly the same words, all that he had heard and what Shakuni had done after leaving Vidisha. Nothing was left out and nothing escaped the Prince.

‘Where is Garga's park?’

‘Along the road here, O, Raja.’

‘Show me when we are there.’

When they arrived at Garga's garden, Revata said: ‘Here it is, Lord,’ and dismounted from his horse to continue on foot. Ashoka and his retinue rode at a gallop into Garga's beautiful retreat, hastened over paths, through forests, along lovely refreshing lotus ponds, and finally spied Shakuni's company. Everyone looked in amazement as the dusty horsemen approached. When Shakuni noticed Ashoka, he jumped up, pale.

Ashoka greeted the richly dressed group with the simple gesture of a raised hand.

‘Well, Shakuni, when I was in Taxila, you were there, too. In Pataliputra I found you, and even at Sage Sayana's hermitage I did not miss you. May I know, what now brings you on my path again?’

‘How dare you enter my park, stranger?’ asked Garga, offended. He did not yet realise who the cheeky horseman was.

‘All land in Aryavarta is my Father's, Maharajah Bindusara's, noble Garga. So be calm.’

Garga was shaken. Meanwhile, everyone bowed low before the new king.

‘I am looking for the holy Brahmins, Devaka, Richika, Sunasepha and Tristus, who have disappeared without a trace from their hermitage,’ answered Shakuni, not hiding his rage while giving Ashoka an insolent look.

‘You mean the killers who were exiled by my Father, the Maharajah, because of their attempt on my life! You are looking for murderers? That is very suspicious, Shakuni.’

‘They had disappeared when I returned to the hermitage.’

‘Returned from where?’

Shakuni went pale but did not answer.

‘From Pataliputra! To get Prince Sumana and his friends, to make another attempt on my life!’

‘Lord,’ said Shakuni, cowed, ‘Devaka sent me.’

‘And who sent you to Vidisha, to Subhadra and Devi, to malign me, and to Garga, the most dissatisfied merchant of Ujjain? And to Virasena, to persuade these people to be disobedient to the new viceroy! And to smuggling, and the Bhils, Maharattas and Rajputs to revolt! Answer!’

Shakuni looked at the viceroy, dazed, and remained silent. A wild rage flowed through Ashoka’s veins. He raised his chakra, but suddenly thought it unfitting for himself, the Viceroy, to punish.

‘You refuse to answer. Kara and Sura, force this young man to confess in the same way that Prince Kala forced Devaka. Take him out into the jungle, so that no one can hear him when he cries out.’

Shakuni trembled; he was the only witness at the time of Devaka’s fate.

‘Lord ... the Brahmin-court in Pataliputra.’

‘And what was the objective?’

Shakuni understood that all his work would have been in vain if he uttered the truth and so he kept silent.

‘Tie the instigator to that *pippala*⁶ ... So ... take a heavy club, Kara ... the left ...’

‘Lord, I will tell you!’ cried Shakuni, in mortal fear.

‘Swear before the highest judge in Ujjain that you will tell the truth, and that your life is at stake, if you lie!’

‘I swear, Lord. So that the people will hate you and will want Sumana as the heir to Bindusara.’

‘Your hate is less steady than that of your guru, Shakuni. You understand that I do not wish a struggle here in this kingdom, like the one against Devaka in Taxila. That is too dangerous for my subjects.’

You are Kunti, Puru's sister,' continued Ashoka. 'They have intended you to be my wife. I married the daughter of rajuka Subhadra, the King's governor in Vidisha, I do not wish to have more wives. And you, Vasumitra, I would like to speak with you. Will you visit me tomorrow in the second kalakramein?'

Vasumitra bowed as a token of his agreement. Then Ashoka looked for five horsemen.

'Untie Shakuni's ropes. Hold him prisoner and take him to my Father in Pataliputra and request him to judge the fugitive this time. The charges are being prepared. I expect you to return with the verdict.'

Shakuni was quickly hoisted onto a horse and off they went on the road to Bhopala.

Ashoka greeted the company by raising his hand. They had looked and listened in utter amazement to everything that had happened and now bowed reverently before the new King. Each seemed so absorbed in his thoughts that not a word was spoken. When Ashoka was already far in the distance on the road to Ujjain with his troop, Sanhita said:

'Hello, my friends, called the crane, while he stepped into the middle of a group of frogs. Who wishes to speak to me?'

Then, she burst out into a roaring laugh.

'Go on with your discussions; now they will be really important!' she went on, mocking.

'Our leader must first go to Pataliputra to gain new points of view,' remarked Vasumitra soberly. 'Come, Sanhita, bring your veena. We are going out on the swing for a breath of fresh air, so we can cool our hot heads.'



APPENDIX AND NOTES BY WYTZE KEUNING

Arthashastra: a work running across fifteen books, written by the first minister of Chandragupta, Kautilya (also called Chanakya or Vishnugupta). It contains strict and severe rules to be followed for running the working of the kingdom to maintain the Mauryan empire.

Atman: principle of explanation of the world; World-soul, All-one (Atman), that unfolds itself in all living beings and so is only to be known by the human being in his inner being (atman). Upon this the sutra of soul being one with god is founded. '*Tat Tvam Asi*'. i.e. That Thou Art, express the identity of the world-soul and the human-soul: the unity of life and spirit.

Brahmanas: theological and ritual explanations of the hymns of the Vedas.

Jambudvipa = Aryavarta = India

Gods:

- Varuna – god of light, water, law and also the underworld;
- Indra – king of gods like Zeus in the Greek mythology;
- Agni – fire-god, who acts as an intermediary to send across the wishes and prayers of the devotees to gods;
- Adityas – sons of Aditi, gods of the solar class, seen in the retinue of

- Varuna, Surya, etc.
- Chandra – moon;
 - Ushas – red morning sky;
 - Ashvins – Vedic twin gods symbolizing the first rays of the sun, speeding along before the Sun at sunrise and sunset;
 - Vayu – wind;
 - Rudra – god of storm;
 - Maruts – the clouds, also known as deities of storm as they are the sons of Rudra;
 - Kama – god of love;
 - Ritus – seasons of the year;
 - Sita – field-goddess;
 - Rivers like Indus, Ganga, Yamuna; sacrificial means like *Soma*, *Vac* (word), and *Brahman* (prayer) were personified.
 - Yama – the Lord of death;

Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu are more of later times. Since Hindu philosophy propagates the idea of one supreme god, sometimes one god represents all gods (aspirations to one deity, godliness, as in the doctrine of the Atman).

Music:

As per the people's beliefs, music had a great influence upon the human beings. Every tonality, key, raga was an expression of a certain feeling. There was a deep connection between nature, seasons, day and night, time of the day and its music. There are 6 gods of tonalities, who correspond with the seasons (Hindola raga for Vasanta, Sri raga for Hemanta, Bhairava raga for Sharad, etc.). Each was married to five nymphs (together 30 raginis). Each had eight putras (sons), together 48, each engaged with a nymph. Following this, there are a total of 132 tonalities. (The old Greeks had many as well). In ancient India, each time of the day desired its own tonality. It was considered very unfitting to use certain melodies on different times of day, or season, as prescribed.

Seasons (six):

Vasanta: months Caitra and Vaishakha (mid March-mid May)

Grishma: months Jyeshtha and Ashadha (mid May-mid July)

Varsha: rainy season, months Shravana and Bhadra (mid July-mid September).

Sharad: Ashvina and Kartika (mid September-mid November)

Hemanta: Agrahayana and Pausha (mid November-mid January)

Shishira: Magha and Phalguna (mid-January-mid March)

Sacrifice:

Four priests or a multiplication thereof were needed for a sacrifice—the hotri: reciting the holy hymns (*rig*), invited the gods to join the sacrifice; the udgatar accompanied the sacrifice with his chanting (*samhitas*); the adhvaryu constructed the sacrificial altars, with mathematical precision and maxims (*Yayus*); the Brahman directed the whole.

Sutra: small excerpts of the content of the Brahmanas.

Shrauta-sutras for public cult, Grihyasutras for domestic rites, Dharmasutras for the duties of the varnas and the stages of life.

Stages of life:

The life of the Arya was neatly divided into four ashrams (stages): He was a 'brahmacharin' (after the thread-ceremony = twice born), pupil of a Brahman. Then 'grihastha' or householder. This stage was followed by 'vanaprastha' or forest-hermit (when his children had grown up), and at last a 'sannyasin' or mendicant.

Upanishads: (of Vedanta = End of Vedanta), the final pieces of the Vedic philosophical or dogmatical part of the Brahmanas.

Varna: earlier word for caste, which is a Portugese name. Varna = colour, so that varna most likely originally indicated a difference in race.

Veda:

The revealed Word consisting of mantras (hymns and prayers). There are four Vedas: *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*.

ADDITIONS – MADE BY TRANSLATORS:

Some Geographical Names Mentioned in the Trilogy:

Magadha:

Country on the right bank of the Ganges, to the south of Videha. Not wholly Aryanised; only in the time of the Buddha under the great king Bimbisara did Magadha become a great empire.

Malwa:

A region of central India.

Anga: An important kingdom on the right bank of the Ganges. The capital was Angapuri (modern day Bhagalpur).

Avanti: The country north of the Narmada; its capital was Ujjain.

Andhra: The name of people and their country; said to be modern Telengana near the mouth of the Godavari; bordered Kalinga.

Kalinga: The country lying south of Odra (Orissa) and extending up to the mouth of the Godavari.

Kerala (putras): Inhabitants and the country between the Western Ghats and the sea north of the Kaveri. The three main rivers in the land are Netravati, Sarasvati and Kartinadi.

Cholas: Country situated on the banks of the Kaveri, covering most of the old Mysore.

Pandya: Country in the extreme south of India, lying south-west of the territory of the Cholas.

Banga: refers particularly to the eastern part of Bengal and included Tripuva and the Garo Hills.

Videha: Country lying to the north-east of Magadha; said to have included a part of Nepal.

A Few Remarkable Characters in the Trilogy

Sayana: The wise sage who is Bindusara's confidant with whom Ashoka has several far-reaching discussions. It is also the name of one of the

greatest exponents of the *Rig Veda*. He is an expert interpreter of Rig Vedic similes.

Kullika: Ashoka's guru, also the name of a learned Vedic teacher of Samhitas and the Brahmanas. He is also mentioned in the Brahmasutras.

Narada: The priest who is shown as hard-hearted in [chapter 2](#) (Jivaka's Sacrifice), is apparently based on a celebrated deified sage of the same name. He is said to be the mind-born son of Brahma and is represented in mythological literature as a messenger of the gods to men and vice versa. He is known for promoting discord.

Sacred animals:

Cow was held as being sacred by the Hindus from the post-Vedic period onwards. Also known as the celestial Kamadheru, it is believed to have been created by Sri Krishna from his own body. The *panchagavya* (five products) obtained from the cow that help in the sustenance of life are: milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung (used even today in expiatory rites).



ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1. Learned by hearing.
2. Shastra: body of teaching, sacred law, precept, rule, scripture, commandments. *Arthashastra*, prescription on statecraft, wealth and worldly duties.
3. Manuals giving ceremonies for domestic life, household rituals for domestic fire.
4. Mind-spirit: mental wisdom, 6th sense; mind as heart. In India, commonly *mind* is referred to as *manas* which is located subjectively in the heart of the solar plexus, whereas the western notion of mind in the head is called *buddhi*.
5. The Upanishads, in ancient days secret for Shudras, the lower caste, see appendix.
6. Buddha calls this: anatta, non-self.
7. *Rig Veda* 1.164.
8. The name India is used here loosely, to refer to the land ruled by the Mauryas, including modern Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Nepal and Afghanistan, but not extending into modern India's South, to Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
9. Pataliputra was located where the Son and Ganga rivers merge.
10. The Vedic Shiva, as the God of storms: the Howler.
11. Rig-Vedic deities, children of Rudra: Gusts of wind, breezes.

12. Indian reference to rain.
13. Sivasamkalpa of the *Vayasaneyi-Samhita*.

Chapter 2

1. King of the cosmos, guardian of cosmic order, of untruth and sin.
2. For child perception.
3. India, the southern 'Rose-apple continent'.
4. Stringed instrument, kind of fiddle, viola.
5. See appendix.
6. Goddess of the fields, agriculture.
7. The first man, law-giver.
8. Final philosophical pieces of Vedas.
9. Key-note.
10. Promise to serve the interest of the one offering the sacrifice, the Yajaman, well.
11. Heavenly beings, lesser gods.
12. Sons of the ragas and the keys, with their betrotheds.
13. The sage of the Shakyas, the Buddha.
14. Stages of Brahmin life: brahmacharin (student), grihaprastha (householder), vanaprastha (forest hermit), sannyasin (wandering mendicant).
15. Solar God, rising sun.
16. Shiva.

Chapter 3

1. Taxila or Takshashila, capital of the far West (near today's Islamabad).
2. Foreigners, here mentioned Hellenes, Greeks.
3. Cobras, mythological snakes.
4. A tribe, thought of as superhuman enemies.
5. Chandragupta stood against the Nandas and massacred them.
6. Killed his father, King Bimbisara.

7. A treatise of polity, dealing with every aspect of governance, written by Kautilya, also known as Chanakya.
8. Children of storm-god Rudra: gusts of wind, breeze.
9. God of wisdom, with elephant head.
10. Seat, placed on the elephant.

Chapter 4

1. Alexander the Great.
2. Courtesan.
3. The Evil.
4. Elephant handler.
5. Arjuna's famous celestial bow, which he yields in the great battle (*Mahabharata*).
6. Aryavarta, the land of the Aryans; another name for the part of India that coincided with the Mauryan empire.
7. Disc; also a mythological weapon used by Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, etc.
8. Knowledge of the soul, the knowing.
9. Maurya – Peacock.

Chapter 5

1. Indian nightingale.
2. Dandaniti: penalty or fines to be levied.
3. Also known as Kautilya, Chandragupta's minister and law-maker.
4. Demon.
5. Seers, poets of the revealed hymns of the Vedas.

Chapter 6

1. Sacrificial offering ceremony.
2. The new incarnation is dependent on the earlier actions.
3. Naming ceremony.
4. Marriage without ceremony by mutual consent.

5. Shakyamuni: literally, sage of the Shakyas.

Chapter 7

1. Big gong.
2. Scholars.
3. Right tributary of the Ganges River.
4. Governing council; councils of five village heads.
5. Now Allahabad.
6. Now Delhi.
7. Allahabad (also Pratihthana).

Chapter 8

1. The Pandavas were the victors in the war of the *Mahabharata*.
2. Spring.
3. King of Lanka in the *Ramayana*.
4. Now Bharuch, port at the Narmada River.
5. Hilly mountain range that divides North from South India.
6. Type of flute.
7. Drum.
8. A high official of the king, minister.

Chapter 9

1. Veda teacher.
2. Greatest sin of a brahmacharin.

Chapter 10

1. The city's chief magistrate.
2. City officers.
3. Natives.
4. Lower Punjab.

5. Self-immolation of a widow on her husbands' funeral fire.

Chapter 11

1. Conqueror of enemies.
2. Peoples ruled by the Greeks.
3. Sri Lanka.
4. Period of time, watch.
5. 1 Unit of length, approximately 4 or 9 miles.
6. Fan.

Chapter 12

1. Land of the five rivers, Punjab.

Chapter 13

1. Rain.

Chapter 14

1. The formless God of Love.
2. Mythical or historical drama.

Chapter 15

1. River Jhelum.

Chapter 16

1. Lust, wrath, greed, pride, arrogance, and over-confidence.
2. King Ajatshatru murdered his father Bimbisara and was murdered by his son Udayibhadda, he by his son, 5 generations.

Chapter 17

1. Great Persian empire of the 6th century bce.
2. Shiva.

Chapter 18

1. Killed by his son Ajatshatru.

Chapter 19

1. Tolerated false witness, with pious motive.

Chapter 20

1. With gracious mien.
2. Desert area, east of the Indus.
3. Member of one of the three highest castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya.
4. Sayana, the honoured Guru, is also the name of one of the greatest commentators of the *Rig Veda*. Likewise, Kullika, too, is the name of a Vedic sage.

Chapter 21

1. Editor's note: The use of cow-dung is not something looked down upon. The cow is considered 'Kamadhenu', the 'wish-fulfilling' cow. The cow provides milk and through milk, butter and ghee (clarified butter) is made, which is used in rituals and worship. The cow's urine too is used for Vedic rituals; cow-dung is anti-bacterial and in rural India, is still used to cover the floor of huts.

Chapter 23

1. According to natives, a male cobra.
2. In the east Vindhya.

Chapter 24

1. Setti – also Shetty, chetty- trading, merchant banking class, now found all over India, South East Asia.
2. A-shoka – one without sorrow; one not feeling or causing sorrow.

Chapter 26

1. Courtesan.
2. Caravan leaders.
3. The evil one.
4. Natives, non-Aryans.
5. Masha: a gold bit; nishka: a gold coin equal to 16 mashas.
6. The tree of wisdom: Bodhi-tree, ficus religiosa, holy fig tree.



Ashoka: The Wise Ruler

Book II

The most important event of his (Ashoka's) reign was the conquest of Kalinga, when he had been anointed eight years ... The indescribable sufferings and atrocities of war smote the victor's conscience, and he made the solemn resolve that never again would he unsheathe the sword to enlarge the bounds of his realm ... Thus a revolutionary change came over Ashoka's outlook and guiding motives of life. His mind and heart were profoundly moved by the gentle teachings of Buddhism, which he now adopted as his religion ... But though Ashoka had himself embraced Buddhism, he was by no means an intolerant zealot. On the contrary, he bestowed due honours and patronage to all the sects then prevailing.

— Rama Shankar Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*

1

THE BLOOD THAT TOLERANCE DEMANDS

When the news came that Bindusara had sent the Wild Prince to be viceroy in Ujjain, it became clear to Kartika, Bindusara's *rajuka* in the south-western part of the empire, that he had failed as a Governor of the Maharajah. Kartika was old and wise but lacked firmness. He called Kesala, a young Brahmin.

'Soon, the Viceroy will be here, Kesala.'

'It is about time, Sir. Malwa is a fertile country but the fruits of the land go mainly into the coffers of disloyal employees.'

'The Maharajah is sent the levies rightfully due to him.'

'Only from those that come in, Sir.'

Kartika looked up at the deep blue sky, pondering.

'Am I a bad *rajuka*, Kesala?'

'No inhabitant of our country is able to purify the Temple of Mara that Malwa has become, Sir. Mara and his henchmen are the lords of our hearts.'

'Because of me?'

'Sir, if everyone was as honest and loyal as you the gods would look down on our beautiful country with delight.'

‘You evade the issue ... Do you personally know the dishonest employees?’

‘I do not know of any honest ones, Sir. Dishonesty, greed and falseness to their oath, have become the norm. They are like the abundantly growing lianas which strangle even the mighty jungle giants.’

‘And you, yourself, my Kesala?’

‘My father jealously guards our karma, Sir.’

‘How do you know about the others?’

‘I am not blind and not born without manas, Sir.’

‘Is it then a weakness, Kesala, to be good-natured and indulgent?’

‘In certain cases, it can be an unforgivable mistake, Sir.’

Kartika sighed and nodded. Both kept silent for a long time ...

‘I have not seen you in the palace office for quite a long time, Kesala.’

‘Sir ... rarely ever does a caravan pass by that gives work and the officers are very slow with their reports of the levies on land. What should a *lipikara* like myself do then, while waiting? Laze away the day? I study what is of interest to me, and I love to ride my horse through the beautiful countryside of Malwa. The mountains, the plants, the animals, they are in blissful ignorance of holy rules and so cannot sin, Sir.’

‘Tell me, how can I demand loyal attendance to duties without giving rise to infinite trouble?’

‘Impossible, Sir. The corruption in this country is as widespread as ants in the jungle. Prince Ashoka may eradicate it ... if he is able to!’

‘Can one chase away greed from the human heart, Kesala?’

‘Maybe, each can from his own heart.’

‘Pataliputra fears the Prince; Taxila adores him.’

‘I heard from a Brahmin pilgrim from the capital that he hates the new Viceroy because of his greed and his craze for power. That could result in a goodly strife in our beautiful Malwa: greed against greed. Who still thinks of his karma, except in temples? And even there!’

‘Did you speak to the pilgrim himself?’

‘Yes, Sir, at Puru’s. He is seeking the company of purushas and rich merchants and tries to make the new Viceroy suspect.’

‘Let us experience a human being not influenced by another man’s judgements, my Kesala.’

‘This coming spring I will go to Taxila. Do I have your approval to examine the western roads? Maybe, you wish to know how many caravans pass that way against your orders.’

‘What is the purpose?’

‘For you, Sir ... The Viceroy is coming.’

‘Do you wish soldiers to go along with you?’

‘No. They might try to put me on the wrong track to serve their own interests.’

Kartika thought for a moment before saying, ‘Do what you feel is appropriate, my Kesala.’

As suddenly as he had in Garga’s park, Ashoka appeared in the palace building of Ujjain.

‘How many caravans arrived this week from Bharuchkacha,¹ honourable Kartika?’

‘One for Kashi and one for Pataliputra, O, Raja.’

‘Fifteen have left Bharuchkacha, twelve of them should have been passing through Ujjain.’

Upset, the old Kartika gazed up at the young Viceroy.

‘How many caravans passed by Ujjain since Ashvina ?’

‘Sir, I do not know, but I will have it investigated.’

‘Not necessary. Fifty left Bharuchkacha, four passed by Ujjain. How often do people pay you tithes on the land in Malwa, Rajuka?’

‘The Vaishyas bring the expected portion of every harvest to the village chiefs and they settle that which is due with the employees with me.’

‘Regularly?’

‘My lipikaras see that it is done regularly. I trust my employees.’

‘And is that justified?’

‘They are all twice-born. Distrust will be like a storm in Vasanta.’

‘And trust?’

Kartika kept silent.

‘Where are your employees?’

‘If there is no work for them here, they are free to do what they like, O, Raja.’

‘Tomorrow, please make certain that all of them are in their offices, Kartika.’

Ashoka rode to the palace. Meetings were organised for the next day with the city’s government, the tax collectors, the road inspectors and the local army chiefs. When Ashoka’s company of soldiers, cavalry and female slaves had been well taken care of, he received Revata and his informants. The Viceroy had given complete authority to Revata to act as he thought best.

‘Sire, I have need of a reliable *sarthavaha*¹.’

‘Wait until tomorrow, my Revata.’

Early the next morning, Ashoka began his investigations into the palace departments.

‘What is your job, Pasita?’

‘The administration of the warehouses for cotton and the collection of the cotton, Sire.’

‘What is the amount of cotton now?’

‘I do not know, O, Raja.’

‘You do not know?’ The Raja repeated in a more stern tone. ‘The warehouses are empty! How much do you collect at each harvest?’

‘Sire, people usually pay in gold. And that I hand over to Kartika.’

‘How much gold did you hand over to Kartika this year?’

‘I do not know, Sire.’

‘You do not know?’

He turned to Kartika: ‘How much gold did this administrator of the cotton warehouses hand over to you this year?’

‘I do not know, O, Raja.’

‘You do not know, Kartika?’ The Raja repeated. ‘How much grain is there?’

Neither Kartika nor the administrator of the granaries knew.

Ashoka then told them the answer: ‘Seven storehouses are empty. The eighth is one-third full.’

Each new employee showing up was immediately summoned to the Raja. No one knew anything. Only the Raja himself appeared to know. He called them all together and made them swear anew the oath of proper fulfilment of duty and fealty to the Maharajah.

‘Remember well the oath you have sworn today and take care that within a week you are well informed about the department, if you wish to remain employed. Where are the remaining twenty officers, high Rajuka?’

‘All of them were informed to be present here, O Raja.’

‘The ones who are absent are all dismissed.’

‘I need a minister for trade and transport in Malwa. I wish you to take up this position of Mahamatra, Vasumitra.’

Vasumitra bowed low for the new Raja.

‘Gracious Raja ... but you do not know me.’

‘Better than any of my father’s subjects in Malwa. Listen, you are a hard-working person in your father’s business. You do not like employees who act in a high-handed manner. It is your view that the rule of the Maharajah should prevail in the country. You were in Bharuchkacha two weeks ago, and paid all the import duties for the goods that your caravan transported, which is something no caravan trader in Malwa ever does. You keep on to the caravan road to Ujjain and do not make use of the smugglers’ routes. It is your opinion that Malwa groans under the burden of corruption and deceit. You have stated that if the Viceroy would end all this, it would be a blessing for the country. You hope the new Raja will bring law and order to the Government ... Do you want to know more?’

‘Sire ... if I can be at your service!’ Vasumitra replied, stammering.

‘I wish to improve the great trade roads.’

‘Are they in a bad condition, Sire?’

‘No, but their condition should never be made an excuse to take a different road. For the caravans, there should be only the road through Ujjain. We will close the other ones for trade. You know better than anyone how caravan traders like the roads to be: canals for the draining of rainwater in wet areas, wells in dry places, fruit trees lining the roads, and where they are needed, caravanserais. I trust such matters to your wise insight. Furthermore, I want a small road to be provided for my personal use from Vidisha to Bodh Gaya as a most speedy connection with Pataliputra.’

‘A work of such magnitude demands much time and many workers, Sire.’

‘I will adhere strictly to the laws of the holy Aryavarta: all taxes and levies on land that are rightfully due to the Maharajah will be collected, no

more, no less. Every craft sman and Shudra is required to work two days a month for the Maharajah. An honest application of that principle, people will approve of, since it is the sacred law of the country. The officers of Malwa have failed in their work. I demand that they regain the losses. You may employ their efforts to carry forward my demands. Only the best among the employees will be placed in positions of trust.'

In a humble gesture, Vasumitra bowed down.

'Who are the best of employees, Sire?'

'They who, above all, hold dear truth, duty, and loyalty to the Maharajah.'

'Such employees you will not find in Malwa, Sire.'

'Then go and look for others, my Vasumitra.'

'Sire, may I ask you something?'

'Certainly.'

'From all parts of the empire we hear stories, tales about your magic deeds. Are you ... an incarnation of Shiva?'

'Tell me whose incarnation you are and I will tell you of whom I am an incarnation, noble Vasumitra. The gods do not wish to judge us for what we did in past lives, but for what we will have wrought in this. We are what we think now, what we do now. I demand: truth, justice and loyalty. My employees serve the Maharajah, not me.'

Vasumitra bowed.

'I need a reliable sarthavaha.'

Vasumitra thought for a moment.

'Sire, can he be a Shudra?'

'Certainly.'

'Then you can have Achala. He speaks nine tongues, knows Bharuchkacha completely, as well as all the large trading cities in Aryavarta.'

A sparkling wind blew through the government offices. A single sharp remark, a question, Ashoka's acquaintance with everything, his interest in the smallest of details, his razor-sharp memory which forgot neither a person nor a case, filled the people with awe, and confirmed the wild legends of Pataliputra, Taxila and Vidisha.

An elderly Brahmin, a *purusha*², entered Ashoka's palace office upon the instigation of Shakuni. In a reserved manner, he made a perfunctory bow. It annoyed the Viceroy.

'Who are you, Brahmin?'

'I am Koshala, Sire.'

'Purusha in Dhala.'

'Yes, Sire.'

'You are very rich, Koshala, you live in a palace. Did you inherit your wealth from your father?'

'My father left me rich possessions but that is of no concern to anyone, as little as I am concerned over others' personal matters.'

'Right, noble Kosala. So, you immediately rebuked Shakuni, when he came speaking ill of me. For two days he was your guest.'

Kosala trembled but, trying hard to appear calm, answered:

'Hospitality is deemed to be a virtue amongst Aryans, Sire.'

'Did you rebuke him?'

'I do not know anymore, O, Raja.'

'When you became purusha, you did swear the oath of fealty to the Maharajah. Is that fealty also a virtue amongst the Aryans?'

'Yes, O, Raja.'

'How many caravans pass by Dhala?'

'In the past years, many caravans have used the road over Dhala.'

'And you permit them, purusha? You know that caravans from Bharuchkacha have to follow the Maharajah's great trade roads over Ujjain. Or, are the interests of the Maharajah of no concern to you either? Do you collect the tax on the caravan-goods?'

After a pause, he replied, 'No, Sire, I am not empowered to do so.'

'Then for what are you empowered, purusha?'

'The collection of levies on the lands, O, Raja.'

'From now on, you will compel each caravan that wants, unlawfully, to take the road past Dhala, make use of the road over Ujjain, if necessary, by force.'

'Yes, Sire.'

'Tomorrow I will hear, too, how large your territory is and how much of the taxes you contribute to the rajuka.'

‘Sire, one cannot do everything in one day.’

‘In one day, there can always be accomplished more than one does.’

Early next morning, Kesala appeared in the Viceroy’s palace.

‘Sire, I have been dismissed. Although I wished to leave, to have it done this way is not fair: my employment was lawful.’

‘I know that. Why do you wish to leave?’

‘I want to live in harmony with my faith. That is impossible here. I will go to Taxila for studies after which I will make a pilgrimage to Kapilavastu³.’

‘Are you thinking of becoming a follower of Gautama the Buddha?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Why could you not live in harmony with your faith here?’

‘Sire, the second precept of the Buddha is: ‘Not to take what is not given to you voluntarily’. In Malwa, everyone takes whatever he can snatch. The fourth precept is: ‘truthfulness’. In Malwa, truth is gone like the stork in monsoon.’

‘What has been your kind of service, Kesala?’

‘I travelled on horseback through the west Malwa to see how many of the caravans were deceiving Kartika.’

‘And how many did you find?’

‘Seven, Sire. When I pointed out to them their deceit, they either jeered at me, deliberately spoke in languages I could not understand, or ignored me.’

‘Why did you investigate all this?’

‘So, the High Rajuka could inform the new Raja.’

‘Are there many caravans that take the smugglers’ routes?’

‘Nearly all of them, Sire.’

‘Is it possible to catch up with those seven caravans?’

‘Maybe, with three or four of them. It would require fifty armed horsemen.’

‘I take you immediately back into service. Within one hour you will leave with fifty heavily armed riders.’

Kesala caught up with five caravans. From then on, all goods unloaded at the large trading cities had to be marked with the royal seal.

‘Who is Kesala?’

‘He is a *lipikara*⁴, Sire, but he meddles too much in the work of other employees. That makes him unpopular.’

‘Honest? Diligent? Loyal?’

‘Very much so, Sire.’

‘You are discharged as of now, Kartika. Are you rich?’

‘No, Sire. I have served the Maharajah honestly.’

‘Then you may keep your wages.’

‘Kesala, from now on you are in charge of the Government offices. Take care there is truth, heedfulness to duty and respect for the laws of the Maharajah, so that you can live in harmony with your faith.’

Kesala, deeply touched, thanked him.

Kullika arrived in Ujjain, and the solicitude displayed by Ashoka to his purohita touched everyone. ‘We will now give thought to others too, my Kullika.’

‘I still consider it as good fortune that I joined you, my Raja. I have come to know and value now the teachings of the Shakyamuni.’

‘I know them too, my Kullika. No teachings for me! A path to be walked upon by only a happy few of the millions in Aryavarta, to reach Nirvana ... Of what value are such teachings for us?’

‘It is a path for everyone to embark on, my Raja! Lies the beauty of your walk in the way you walk it ... or in the journey’s end?’

‘No, of course not in its journey’s end.’

‘Well, the beauty in the teachings of Gautama Buddha is the great importance he attaches to faith and to life itself. He praises life as joy; that is what Aryavarta has forgotten because of the constant fear of Manu’s heavy hand.’

‘This is what Devi told me, too.’

‘Then the Rani is a Buddhist, Sire. It is beautiful, too, how he respects all life.’

‘I killed the judicial elephant and Virata, Devaka, Richika, and ...’

‘Some people’s path leads over abysses with crocodile-infested rivers and steep tiger-rocks, while others’ over low-lying lands of luxuriant pastures. A king has to judge the deeds of his subjects, a Vaishya only to cultivate his fields and tend his cattle.’

‘Never will I respect a life if it places itself, out of greed, above other man’s happiness.’

‘I hope that your road will be long and your Nirvana far away yet, my Raja.’

‘So, I may learn to respect life, you mean?’

‘Someone whose mind goes out to the sorrow and happiness of others will learn that by himself, Sire. No, to pave the way for others.’

‘To be able to do so, there should be at least one person who believes in us, my Kullika, and that is why I missed you much. Now I have two.’

Ashoka had taken Devi from Vidisha to Ujjain. The capital was festively adorned. The employees had soon come to regard Ashoka’s authority as inescapable, and no one dared anymore go his own way. The rise in the number of caravans created a great deal of work. Merchants and caravan traders bowed to this new control. The Raja demanded his tax strictly according to the rules the Maharajah had laid down for Malwa. The purushas were given strict orders to collect that part of the harvest that was lawfully due, and soon the storehouses were filled. The people wallowed in the mysticism surrounding the Wild Prince, and watched in amazement at the marvel that one single man was able to bring about in the south-west of the great empire. When Devi entered the city, like a fairytale Princess in radiant beauty, seated by the side of her beloved Prince on the royal elephant Jampa and followed by Ashoka’s fierce warriors, there seemed to be no end to the cheering. The loveliest of flowers were showered by the crowds lining their path. Ujjain felt how the depressing cloud of injustice and deceit which had hung over them for a long time, had given way to the justice and power of the Raja. It was like experiencing cooling rain after a searing period of hot sun, a feast for the joyful revellers.

His influence in Taxila and Ujjain affected Ashoka even more than it did his subjects. He observed the eagerness with which people submitted themselves to a sovereign who, supported by a strong will, ruled justly and honestly. But, like a threatening power, an obscure force of nature, he felt the spirit of the Brahmin priests opposing him, their twisted grip on the souls of the simple Vaishyas. In Taxila he had wanted—amidst all those great scholars from the university—to seek for the one truth that had to exist. ‘Search for truth and you will find many truths.’ Or, revelations, after

all? But which? Of Buddha? Empathising in compassion and joy. With the sacrificial priests as well? Foolishness!

After a hard day's work, at evening time, when Chandra spread out his calming light over Malwa, he would often sit on the verandah with Devi and Kullika. Then everything within him cried out for clarity:

'Buddhism is good for monks in monasteries, my Kullika. Only there, within the walls, pervades the right conditions for the 'path'. He who wants to control *Jambudvipa*⁵ will find such a faith ludicrous. It is as if a warrior calls: 'I want to fight my strongest enemy, so bind my hands and feet'. Of what worth is compassion in a world of priests' hatred!'

'No country needs the all-encompassing love of the Shakyamuni more than Jambudvipa, my Raja. Who is the one you love most in Bindusara's empire?'

'Vidisha Mahadevi,' laughed Ashoka.

'The Rani is a descendant of the Shakyaclan, and in her being she is a follower of the Shakyamuni.'

'But the whole clan had to flee the country of the Buddha because of Vidudabha. For him, the gentle followers of Gautama Buddha had become an all-too-easy prey.'

'No Raja in Jambudvipa established his power with less bloodshed than the Raja of Ujjain.'

'Child's play, compared to what I want to achieve, my Devi. The Buddha would shackle me.'

'Hatred is not appeased by hatred; only love appeases hatred.'

'Egotism is not vanquished by love: to love is to surrender. An informant from Pataliputra told me that the Maharajah has been ill. The Brahmins advised him to take a decision about the succession to the throne. The Maharajah refused. Fortunately, the magician cured my father. Two of the Princes, leaders in the army-camp, had Shiva's temple demolished, but the next morning the building was again in place. The temple had not been consecrated by the priests, thus was not sacred, and had to be burned down. No soldier had dared to carry out the order, fearing Shiva's wrath. Then a penitent from Pataliputra came forward to do it. The following day the temple was rebuilt once again, and Father has forbidden it to be brought down. The soldiers of the four camps are now very zealous in their worship of Shiva. Shakuni has fled and vanished without a trace. This, Sela

surmises, with the help of the Brahmin-court. And so, in Pataliputra too, each chooses his own selfish way. I, too.'

'I fear the Shiva-cult will coarsen the warriors, Sire.'

'Does my purohita expect that events in Pataliputra will take place like a dispute in a forest hermitage?'

'Maybe, the peaceful division of the eastern and western regions of the empire could be the answer.'

'If it were a battle for worldly power between Sumana and me, Kullika, yes. But in essence, it is a battle for justice and happiness. Either Sumana wins, and thus the priest, or I win, which means, the people of my father's vast empire win. I do not see how that can happen without a battle.'

'A new light has been kindled in Jambudvipa, Sire: The life of each being is sacred.'

'Apply that to Aryavarta and Mara, the devil, will reign.'

'Otherwise, the army will reign. Is that a higher principle? Even when it enforces goodness! What is the value of that outer deed in comparison with the inner attitude of loving kindness, compassion, empathy, equanimity towards the impure or wretched ones, in thoughts, words and deeds, the four Sublime States of the Buddha?'

'Sumana ... Devaka ... Richika ... Tritsus ... Hasta. Not to speak of Jokarna, Sahula and Lamba.'

'The magic of love for all beings, even the raging wild elephant could not resist.'⁶

'Sumana ... Devaka ... Richika ... Tritsus. No ... I, Maharajah! I praise the worship of Shiva: Shiva is the god of destruction as well as the life-creating power, and, my Kullika, of the eternal truth. Why should I not venerate Shiva as the punishing, avenging god, who takes on your four principles of truth? Buddha, my Devi, has proved too weak for the entrenched habit to surrender to the heartless Brahmin priests. Are not these your words?'

'My dear Ashoka, it is dangerous to place the tiger beside the peacock.'

'But it is more dangerous to lose oneself in the beauty of the holy peacock. Why should not Shiva, with his purifying, immaculate truth, take in the desecrators of your beautiful doctrine of all-encompassing love, and then pass them on, purified, to samsara for rebirth? You fear my actions will

demand blood. But do you not count the blood that your tolerance demands?’

‘Sire, Revata wishes to speak to you.’

‘Sire, my work would have been impossible had I not had the help of Achala, who is fluent in the languages spoken by the foreign sailors. We have formed a caravan the way you ordered. I was the caravan trader, Achala, the sarthavaha. We bought sandalwood and cinnamon oil from the Deccan, silk and swords from Kashi, gemstones, ivory and sweet aromatic oils from Taxila, pearls from Sinhala; in short, everything that is of value for the merchants of foreign countries. Then, we left for Bharuchkacha, where we bribed the officers with precious objects, and so ensured access into government offices and their secrets, which are for sale everywhere with a few tricks. Then, we started our trade with the foreigners: the means was our merchandise, the purpose, to get to know everything about the administrators and the Port area.’

Revata informed the Raja about what was going on in the ports.



SHIVA'S THUNDERBOLT

‘The day after tomorrow we will depart towards Bharuchkacha.’ Early the next morning, Ashoka gave orders for Jampa, an oxcart, and a few of the war chariots to proceed, and to wait for him some two *yojana* from Bharuchkacha. Then he prepared himself for the journey. He selected a fairly heavily armed force. Devi bid the Viceroy farewell. Kullika blessed the troops.

‘Sire, let wisdom guide you,’ whispered the Rani to the king.

‘I never spill more blood than Shiva decrees, my beloved Devi.’

Ashoka's expedition to Bharuchkacha was hastened to the quickest pace. Achala rode with the King and Kullika ahead of the troops. They followed the caravan road to Mahismati and then rode through the southern forests of Malwa until they reached the high Vindhya. From there, they descended to the Narmada, keeping to the course of the river as much as possible till Bharuchkacha. Ashoka, when he could, asked the sarthavaha for details about the port area. His questions probed further and deeper than Achala really liked to divulge. But the young Viceroy was irrepressible in his inquisitiveness. He connected facts, formed plans, never forgot any detail and Achala realised its importance only when Ashoka had already drawn his conclusions and had decided on the strategy of his actions. At some distance from the town he reorganised his troops before they marched

into Bharuchkacha, going directly to the marketplace on the banks of the River Narmada.

Ashoka's arrival created a stir in the busy market town. People from all corners, foreigners and citizens, came to see the unusual cavalcade. None knew what to make of this unexpected appearance in the streets. An imperial elephant? A splendidly dressed-up Prince? An armed force? In the palace of Sarvilaka, people were as surprised as they were unprepared. The Purusha's face lost all colour when he heard that a strong troop of warriors stood in front of the palace. Could it be the Iranians? Had Gobad not threatened him that he would make his complaints to the government in his country? Foolishness. They would not dare to be so brazen as to invade the empire of the mighty Maharajah of India! Kartika? Ridiculous!

Ashoka entered the palace with Kullika and Achala, followed by twenty heavily armed soldiers, and proceeded towards the hall of Justice. There, they took their places on the three chairs meant for the judges.

'Tell Sarvilaka to come here immediately,' he told a startled servant who had come rushing up to him.

'Sire, my master is in the ladies' quarters and no one is allowed to disturb him.'

'The Viceroy of Malwa wishes to speak to him in no later than five minutes.' He then said to Jala, his chief officer, 'Follow that servant with ten warriors.'

A moment later, Sarvilaka appeared, accompanied by his principal wife. They threw themselves down at the feet of the Raja.

'Gracious Raja, I regret that I was not aware of your arrival. Bharuchkacha surely would have welcomed you with a warm reception. How can I be of service to Your Grace? Nothing will be too difficult for me and for the city government.'

'Stand up, Sarvilaka. I do not come to ask favours from you. You are appearing here at my court and you will give me an account of your deeds. Swear the oath that you will speak the truth, Sarvilaka. What rights have you claimed from the incoming ships?'

'A tenth part, O, Raja, as the law decrees.'

'No more?'

'No, Sire.'

‘Jala, have three captains of foreign ships sent in.’ He turned once again to Sarvilaka: ‘How much is claimed from the caravans departing?’

‘They ought to contribute a tenth part, too, Sire. The caravans do make their payments in Ujjain though.’

‘How many caravans have been despatched from Bharuchkacha to Ujjain in the last three weeks?’

‘I have to ask my employees, O, Raja.’

‘Let Vatsa come here, Jala ... Do you compel the caravans to take the great trade road to Ujjain, Sarvilaka? According to the decree of the Maharajah you are required to provide a guide for them.’

‘Kartika does not request that, gracious Raja.’

‘So, both of you neglect your duty. How do you know then, that the caravans pass by Ujjain?’

‘The caravan-traders take the oath that they will follow the allocated road.’

‘Jala, send in the three caravan-traders who have visited Bharuchkacha several times ... How many pirate ships make the Bharygzenus unsafe?’

‘I do not know, Sire.’

‘You do not know, Purusha of the ports? How many ships have you sent out to eliminate the pirates?’

‘None, Sire. The masters of the ships have to be responsible for their own safety.’

‘You have sworn the oath to the Maharajah to encourage the prosperous growth of the sea ports and to protect the sailors. Do you not have ships? Are not all wharves of the Maharajah at your disposal? Do you not order the building of new ships?’

‘Yes, O, Raja, I rent them out to the masters of the ships.’

‘How much of that income goes to the Maharajah?’

‘I do not quite know, Sire.’

‘Why, if you do not take care of the safety of the sailors, do you alert the pirates about the departures of the foreign ships?’

‘The departure of each ship is proclaimed with flags, O, Raja.’

‘From each ship?’

‘... Yes, Sire.’

‘Who gives the order to put out the flags?’

‘Vatsa. For each ship there is the flag of its own country.’

‘Bring in the man who puts up the flags, Jala ... To what places do the pirates bring the treasures they have seized?’

‘It is said that they have secret hideaway ports.’

‘And to where do you allow your own treasures to be transported?’

‘Sire, my treasures are kept in this palace.’

‘All of them?’

‘... Yes, Sire.’

‘You do, now and then, give feasts in your palace, infamous for its women and inebriating drinks, which are freely available for the guests in your palace. Do you believe that you enhance the honour of the Maharajah, which is your duty, in this way?’

Sarvilaka kept silent.

‘You know Gobad, the Iranian?’

Sarvilaka bowed deeply. Of all his misdeeds in the course of his duties, his behaviour towards the Iranian merchant Gobad, was the most insolent and unscrupulous.

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Did you have any authority to demand his daughter as your wife, after he had refused?’

‘No, Sire.’

‘For what offence have you thrown the Iranian into jail?’

Sarvilaka kept silent.

‘All because he did not give in to your lustful demands!’

‘He defied my authority and threatened me with an army from Iran, Sire.’

‘Was that defiance so unlawful, when the high Purusha of the entire port area had denied him his rights? Is it your wish to have law and order in Bharuchkacha?’

Sarvilaka kept silent.

‘Where does Gobad live now? And his wife and his daughter?’

‘Sire, I set them free.’

‘Without a meeting of the court being called?’

‘Yes Sire, he has left. They say that pirates seized his ship and sailed away with it.’

‘And the Purusha of the Maharajah let that happen?’

Three foreign merchants, three caravan-traders, Vatsa and the flag-servant, Wanka, were then led in. All of them swore the oath that they would speak the truth and Ashoka warned them that he would pass the severest sentence for any perjury.

‘When do you fly out a flag, Wanka?’

‘When Vatsa gives the order, Sire.’

‘For each ship?’

‘I do not know, Sire.’

‘One flag for each ship?’

‘Sometimes, I have to add a red or a blue flag.’

‘With what purpose, Vatsa?’

‘The blue one to indicate that the ship has a rich cargo and the red one to show that there is a very rich cargo on board.’

‘A sign meant for whom!’

Vatsa kept silent and looked at Sarvilaka who threw a furious look at him.

‘It takes place at the orders of Sarvilaka, Sire.’

‘As a sign for whom?’

‘For the pirates, gracious Raja.’

‘And you gave that order, Vatsa?’

‘Sarvilaka is my master, O, Raja.’

‘And you carry out orders against the laws of the Maharajah?’

‘A refusal could cost my job, maybe my life.’

‘And that is worse than deceiving the sacred Maharajah?’

‘Obedience to the Purusha is my first duty, Sire.’

‘If that Purusha upholds the law or even tries to uphold it.’

The three caravan-traders declared that they never swore the oath to pass by Ujjain. On the contrary, they were advised to take the road through the valley of Malvi or the safer road over Dhala, to the benefit of both parties. On Ashoka’s orders, Achala interrogated the foreign merchants in their own language. It turned out that they had to contribute one-fifth of their cargo for clearance rights and the best of their valuable merchandise and female slaves had to be turned over to Sarvilaka.

‘Do any of the judges wish to ask anything more?’

‘Vatsa, where are the treasures of Sarvilaka?’

Vatsa did not dare lie. ‘Rebhila always loads the ships of Sarvilaka, O, Raja. He will know it.’

‘So, you too know it, Vatsa. Answer!’

‘Sire, they were shipped by Sarvilaka.’

‘To which place?’

‘None of us knows the hiding place, Sire.’

‘Where are Gobad and his family, Sarvilaka?’

For one moment, Sarvilaka appeared to hesitate. Then he said: ‘Sire, it is not known to me.’

‘So, you have answered none of my questions truthfully. During all the time you were the Mahamatra, you served your own interests and not that of the Maharajah; out of your employees you made corrupt cheats. You stole from foreigners, persuaded caravan-traders not to pay the rightful tax to the Maharajah. You conceal the profits made from your greed and misuse of the power you have over the coast of Kalyana. Today, you broke your oath twenty times, an oath that should be sacred, to you in particular, Purusha. You did not protect the foreigners as was your duty, refused them their rights and deprived them of their freedom, because you could not check your licentious ways. For that you earn the sentence of death, Sarvilaka.’

Ashoka made a sign to Jala. Jala put Sarvilaka against the wall and a moment later his body was pierced by ten arrows. A few soldiers carried away the corpse.

Suddenly, Sarvilaka’s wife rose from her posture of entreaty and cast desperate eyes on the Viceroy. Until now, Ashoka had not paid the slightest attention to her.

‘Take the woman back to the harem.’

Before anyone could prevent it, she brought forth a thin dagger and stabbed herself in her heart. Nobody dared move; each waited for an order from the Raja. The Viceroy saw that the result of his penalty had gone beyond what he had desired.

Kullika, who knew Ashoka’s mind well from years of intimacy, whispered to him: ‘The four Sublime States of the Buddha, Sire ...’

‘Carry the two corpses together to one funeral pyre ... Achala, I assign you as Mahamatra of the Port of the Maharajah.’

Achala shot up and staggered: 'Sire, I am only ... sarthavaha ...'

Ashoka smiled, 'But a good caravan-leader!'

'Sire, I am a Shudra.'

'But you are a human being, Achala.'

'Yes, Sire.'

'Then I want you to take immediately an oath of loyalty towards the Maharajah, before me and my Purohita.'

It was a brief, impressive ceremony. Shortly afterwards, they went back to work.

Ashoka had six of his fastest sailing ships heavily armed and equipped to prepare for the fight against the pirates.

An 'Egyptian ship' was apparently loaded with great treasures, and next to the Egyptian flag fluttered a red flag on the palace buildings on the coast. When three pirate ships appeared, coming closer and closer, tempted by the tarrying of the Egyptian vessel, Jala sailed out with the six fast galleons, and in the short fight that ensued, soon overpowered the pirates, killing most of them, and forced the others to show him their hiding place and the place where Sarvilaka had hidden his treasures. A few days later Jala returned with Gobad, his wife and daughter, along with heavy cargoes of valuables and the captured pirates.

Ashoka accorded Gobad the hospitality reserved for a guest of honour, until his ship and its cargo were fully restored. The feared name of the Wild Prince buzzed through the streets and buildings of Bharuchkacha and was carried forth by the ships across the ports of far-away lands, so that soon, everyone had a name for the strong-willed, hard-working king: Ashoka the Righteous.

When Ashoka was convinced that he had found a capable Purusha in Achala, he returned to Ujjain. Another sarthavaha would lead him along the interior roads of Malwa, the roads used by the caravans for smuggling.

'Do you know the traders' secret roads, Avalaka?'

'I know them all, Sire. When employees of the Maharajah forget their oath, the caravan-traders and the sarthavaha seek their own routes, although the risks increase. Rapacious tribes of the desert and of the forests of the Aravalli-mountains and the mountains of Malwa, sense easily the right opportunity to fulfil their avaricious plans. An encounter with caravans

often leads to a fight to death. They know that no support from the tributary administration is to be expected.'

'And if we should meet them?'

'Normally, they fear the imperial army, Sire. They understand that if they win a much larger army will return.'

The first tribe they came across was a group of Rajputans, proud herdsmen, who were looking for lush pastures for their herds of horses, camels and mules south of their territory. They could recognise when a caravan carried valuable objects and that was bait enough for a fight. They looked in amazement to see a body of armed horsemen camping on their pastures. They approached the horses boldly, examining and touching them, and everyone was filled with admiration. Jala called for Ashoka, who was in his tent.

The Viceroy saw that they were Rajputans, fearless warriors, who claimed to be descendants of the ancient Kshatriyas.

'Who are you,' their chief asked.

'Ashoka, the commander of the army of Taxila, and the Viceroy of Ujjain.'

'Mahadeva Asoka!' They fell back in great excitement, knelt, and bowed their heads down to the grass. Mahadeva Ashoka had become a deified, mythical figure amongst the desert people, ever since his assistance to the Rajputans at the Satadru, thus becoming a mighty patron of their clans. Ashoka did not reject an alliance with these greatly respected warriors, an alliance which they offered with great zeal. Maybe, their skills could be of use, if not now then in the future. The chief was therefore received in Ashoka's tent with great respect. Here, it was decided that Jala would stay behind with them, to train them as warriors and make pacts with other clans while Ashoka was proclaimed their chieftain.

About a week later, when Ashoka's army had crossed the borders of Malwa, towards night time, they neared a huge banyan tree. Ashoka's attention was caught by a row of rocks which had been laid out like a terraced floor on a mound of earth.

'The sacred tree of the Bhils, Sire.'

'Aryans?'

‘I suspect it to be *Mlecchas*¹, although there do exist fairly light-skinned Bhils. They are believed to be cattle thieves, robbers, capable of any crime, and great hunters.’

‘We will make our camp here, Avalaka.’

‘Your army is not large, Sire, and the Bhils are known to be very good archers. On horseback, too, they have no equals.’

‘Except for my horsemen.’

The tending of men and animals brought activity beneath the jumble of branches, bearded aerial roots, and shadow-spreading foliage. When the sun was setting behind the western hills and the moon, like an opening lotus showed pale in the gloom, the camp signal for the night resounded. The sounds of the camp then gave way to the soft shrieks of monkeys and parrots, hidden in the dark foliage of the banyan. Ashoka made his rounds and waited. He stood awhile, still, pensive. Then he crouched down at last. Revata was late ... Kullika approached him, threw a cloak around his shoulders and seated himself silently next to the Raja.

The banyan rose up in front of them like a black mass. The holy tree of the Bhils, sacred: from the smallest seed growing up into a huge temple, its mighty crown towering towards Indra’s heaven, spreading blessing, calm, strength, life from the All-life, will from the All-will; enduring, demanding nothing, giving, not asking; breathing out refreshing life, but itself bearing the scorching heat of the Indian sun; growing ever bigger, higher, stronger, more blissful. Holy banyan ... what effrontery that the priests call themselves holy!

At last, Ashoka saw Revata approaching. The faithful Shudra leaped down from his horse, knelt down and informed the Raja in clear words of his investigations.

‘Go to your tent and take rest, my Revata.’

Ashoka followed him with his eyes ... his most indispensable friend ...

‘Revata is the most incomprehensible person I have met in my life, Kullika. Open as the plains of the Ganga to Surya. I trust him more than myself. His only motivation is to serve me. Upon his reports, I am sure to see everything with clarity, as clearly as the white lotus on a most radiant day. There is no deed of Revata which is not focussed with pure transparency on my wishes, my interests. His *manas* is sharper than that of Sayana, he knows more about the world and the affairs of governance than

the most capable Mahamatra. He forgets nothing that is of interest to him. His knowledge of medical science is vast. He acquired that in Taxila, out of pure interest, in those moments when he could be of no service to me.'

'What then is incomprehensible about this human being, Sire?'

'That he—a Shudra in Aryavarta—remains Revata. I offered him the highest place, next to me. His answer was: 'Sire, my only advice to you as a minister would be: 'Keep Revata as an informant, if ever you want to be the Emperor' ... Maybe, he is right. I give him an order and he knows how to execute it. His voice can mimic any other voice, with his disguise he can impersonate anyone, with his manas he pierces, sees through everything ... You see, Kullika, thanks to Revata, I now know that Chanayana is approaching from a distance, dragging himself as though tired. Yet is not tired, and has been following me for weeks on Shakuni's orders.'

'Their spy, like Revata is yours.'

'No ... their interested party! Revata, a spy! Revata is my guardian angel without any interests of his own, my Kullika!'

'May Varuna bless your tents and Indra your soldiers, Sire.'

'Bless you,' responded Kullika. Ashoka kept silent.

'Is it permitted for a tired pilgrim to stay this night in your camp under the holy banyan, Sire?'

'Why holy?'

'It is great and mighty.'

'Is what is great and mighty than holy, stranger?'

'And what comes from Brahman, Sir.'

'You, too, are from Brahman. Does that make you holy?'

'Sir, I am a Brahmin and my karma is high.'

'Which holy places did you travel on foot to in the last weeks, Brahmin?'

'Many, Sire.'

'You must have lost your way; in the west of Malwa there are no holy places.'

'Sire, I am tired, that is why I ask for hospitality in your camp.'

'How many Bhils do you expect here early tomorrow morning?'

'Sire, the Bhils are *Mlecchas*, cattle thieves, robbers.'

'And capable of any crime.'

‘They are dangerous to pilgrims, Sire.’

‘Then why did you visit their camp today?’

The Brahmin was visibly frightened. ‘Sire, you are mistaken. The Bhils are impure.’

‘What rewards have you promised them? How many horses, how many oxen?’

The priest lost his quiet control and stammered.

‘Sire, how could I ... I would like to travel ... with your party, to be safe from those accursed ones. I am a good storyteller, Sire, and I know the Vedas.’

‘Do you wish that your horse, left behind over there on the fringes of the forest, is also to be taken care of?’ The face of the Brahmin became distorted. ‘When you return to Pataliputra, please inform the Brahmin-court that the Wild Prince does not tolerate a second Devaka in his camp, Chanayana.’

Chanayana took a few steps back, as though he wanted to run. Ashoka gave a whistle. Five armed guards rushed forward.

‘Kill this spy!’ Ashoka said indifferently.

‘Sire, when you kill a Brahmin you will be visited by the most severe punishment from the gods!’

‘Are you afraid of death, Chanayana? You commit crimes which call for capital punishment: you betray the army of the Maharajah to the enemy but when you are caught you hide yourself behind your Brahmanism! Tie up this spy! Two men will guard him. At every word he utters, enforce silence upon him with a bamboo stick. When the Bhils are nearing, make three sharp signals with the conch.’

‘The sacred banyan, O, Raja!’ whispered Kullika.

‘Shiva’s lightning bolt along the tree-trunk will kill the holiest pilgrim, noble Kullika.’

Ashoka lay down to sleep, dissatisfied: to give an account to men like Sarvilaka and Chanayana, he felt, was weakness. Revata’s testimony was more than enough!

The next morning, just before sunrise, three fierce bugles of the horn were heard. A large troop of Bhils was approaching, small, slender, lively figures, frizzy haired and dark-skinned. All of them held their heavy bows drawn, ready for shooting.

The camp was galvanised into action and armed itself.

‘Who dares to come to rest under our sacred tree?’

Avalaka translated their question for the Viceroy.

‘You have the wrong finger on the bow-string,’ Ashoka remarked.

‘Who are you?’

It was Avalaka who replied: ‘Our commander is Prince Ashoka.’

‘Mahadeva Ashoka from the Rajputans?’

‘Yes.’

All of them were greatly startled. They stepped back, confused, then threw themselves down onto the earth, stretching out their hands towards the Viceroy. Then the Bath, their priest, came forward; he understood the language of the Rajputans.

‘Sire, one of our Princes asked Drona, the greatest of archers and master of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, if he would consent to teach him archery. Drona refused. He claimed that the Bhils, who were left by the Aryans bereft of all their land and possessions, were robbers and cattle thieves. Disappointed, the son of the Raja returned home, carved for himself a statue of Drona, worshipped it, and became a great archer. And that happened to all Bhils who worshipped Drona. The Aryans complained about it at Drona’s. Drona asked the son of our Raja to take up a bow and shoot. When he saw that the Bhil was far superior to the Aryans, he ordered him to cut off the first finger of his right hand with a sword. The Prince threw himself onto the earth before Drona, ready to obey. The worship of the Bhils, however, placated Drona. He ordered the Prince to swear that he would never draw with his index finger, but always with the middle finger. Ever since those days, the Bhils draw their bows with their middle finger, Sire.’²

‘And do you shoot as well as that son of the Raja?’

‘Are we deserving of a place in your army, if we shoot as well as you, Sire?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then give us a chance to prove it.’

Ashoka had a target placed at a distance where he was just about certain of his shot. Then he took a bow, aimed, and shot the arrow right through the heart of the target. The Bhils came running forward with loud cries of surprise. They now looked for their best archer, trembled when he strung his bow and pulled, for they were convinced the Bhils were the best archers

in the world. The Bhil's arrow, however, landed just on the edge of the target.

‘Mahadeva Ashoka,’ they whispered. ‘Sire, the Bhils are the best horsemen of the world!’

‘Go and get your fastest horseman and decide the distance yourself.’

One of the dark horsemen rode a good distance away, placed himself there, put up a pennant and waited. Ashoka chose his fastest horse and placed himself next to the rider of the Bhils. He felt a rush of his old fighting spirit.

The horses started and raced ahead. The Bhils looked on in silence at the riders, now stretched out, racing forward. When they saw, however, that Ashoka had overtaken the Bhil who tried to spur on his horse by beating and kicking the animal, they became agitated; they stamped their feet and yelled with growing excitement. They saw how the waiting horseman lowered his pennant when Ashoka neared, jumped from his horse, then threw himself on the ground, his hands stretched out towards the Maurya. Ashoka rode at full speed in a wide circle around the devout Bhil and then raced back, without slackening his speed. Then he reined in and looked at his opponent, who had let himself slide down from his horse. The horse came galloping towards him but the Bhil ran away as fast as he could in the direction of the jungle. Ashoka sent out some riders to catch him. After a short fast ride, they returned with the Bhil.

‘Kill him, kill him!’ his tribesmen screamed, but Ashoka raised his hand, approached his opponent, and gave him a horse.

‘From now on this is your friend and one never beats one's friends!’ Then he turned to the Bath and said: ‘Tell your chieftain, I cannot take his tribe into my army just yet. Send every caravan which crosses your territory to Ujjain. When I need you I shall call for you as my soldiers.’

The chieftain agreed with the suggestion of the Viceroy and wished to acknowledge Ashoka's supreme sovereignty, to which all the Bhils gave hearty approval. With much ceremony, the priest now made a small incision in the right thumb of the chief and with the blood he made the mark of a *tilaka*³ on the forehead of the viceroy.

‘As long as Mahadeva Ashoka lives, the Bhils will remain loyal to him, whatever may happen. We refuse to pay homage to the Brahmins; we give all our reverence to Raja Mahadeva Ashoka.’

‘Here is a man in the camp who wishes to speak to you.’ Ashoka let Chanayana come forth, which aroused great excitement amongst the Bhils. One of the dark riders tied him to his horse and then the troop raced away at full speed.

‘Hate ... Sire ... one does not cure with hate,’ Kullika warned seriously.

‘Do you wish that I should myself execute the sentence on the spy of my enemies, Kullika?’

‘Revata, Sire!’



3

THE MISTAKE

Life in the south-western territory gradually grew in harmony with the vision of the Viceroy and his carefully selected officers. Prosperity was increasing, trade being guided in the right direction, the warehouses of the Maharajah filled, and earnings grew. Achala ruled over the ports wisely, with goodness and justice, just like his master. The goods stolen by Sarvilaka were sent to Ujjain along with a large caravan: lamp-stands from Sheba made of gold and silver, the most wonderful carpets from Bactria and Persia, cedar-wood cabinets in-laid with ivory and gem stones from Egypt, fantastic pearly-white sculptures from Macedonia, the most exquisite pearls from Sinhala, a choice of bracelets and anklets, necklaces, fine woven fabrics from Phoenicia, and many more precious goods.

When Devi felt her pregnancy was nearing its completion the Raja's family left for Vidisha. The birth had to take place in her maternal home. Moreover, Ashoka wished to investigate how far the work on the new road had progressed. It troubled him not having a speedy connection with the capital, if ever his presence was needed.

A few days later, Sagka appeared, sent from Taxila by Prince Kala. Ashoka was startled.

‘You are here, Sagka? Has anything untoward happened?’

‘Sire, the ill-mannered soldiers of Prince Sumana cause a lot of discontent among the people of Taxila. The Viceroy and the Council always support the stand of the soldiers; the people are viewed as the damned. A few times the people took severe action against the rude warriors who were mocking their snake-rituals; they were heavily punished for that. Prince Kala pointed out to the Council the risks involved in such reprisals. The response was that the Viceroy would not tolerate the audacity of an accursed people, the way commander Ashoka did. Kala then reminded them of the peace, prosperity, and cordial relations that existed during Ashoka’s reign. The response was that this was possible only because heresy and unbridled behaviour of the Taxilans was tolerated. Some time later, when Prince Sumana and several officers were at Gopa’s and had drunk a lot they called Prince Kala the ‘chief commander of the black Dasyus’. A furious Prince Kala, in retaliation, called them ‘white boozers and womanisers’. The next day the Prince was summoned by the Viceroy: the Council had decided that all black Takkas were to be disbanded from the army and the soldiers of Ashoka combined with other army units. Kala’s reply was: ‘You have sealed your doom, O, King. Within a month, there will be an uprising of the northern peoples, and I would not be too certain of Taxila.’ They were so displeased with this remark that they imprisoned Prince Kala. The same night, however, he was freed by former soldiers of the army chief. The Takkas moved out from the city to the North. Prince Kala is hiding in Gopa’s house and waits for your orders, Sire.’

Ashoka pondered for a long time.

‘Well, Sagka, Prince Kala will go to the north as my commander-in-chief. No uprising of the people. Always retreat when Sumana’s warriors are closing in. I do not wish the Takkas to be massacred, neither the soldiers of Pataliputra be avenged, because then a war in the north-west becomes inevitable. Vimalamitra has to attempt to calm the people of Taxila. What do you think, my Kullika?’

‘Sire, your advice is always wise and sound.’

‘My soldiers will need something from Shiva, Lord of Death, Kullika.’

Kullika kept silent.

The next morning, Sagka left for Taxila and took with him the news that Devi had given birth to a healthy and sturdy boy who would be called Mahindra.

Without pausing, like Surya on his journey around the earth, Ashoka proceeded along his path. Nothing escaped his sharp mind. When Ashoka was far from Achala's thoughts, the Viceroy stood in front of the Government Palace in Bharuchkacha, in full knowledge of everything that was going on in the port. At other times, he criss-crossed the west to check on the intentions of the Bhils and the Rajputans, and on their progress in the art of warfare under the guidance of Jala.

Well over a year after the day that Devi had given birth to a daughter too, Ashoka received an urgent message from Gopa.

'The Council of Brahmins has decided to send a punitive expedition to the north. Prince Kala and Sagka are to be slain. The Takkas who do not contribute levies any more, will be punished harshly. Two Princes will be in command. Vimalamitra is dismissed as minister. There are rumours that Taxila will revolt as soon as a major part of the army departs.'

'And Prince Sumana?'

'Stays in Taxila, lives for his pleasures, drinks a lot and gambles more. The Brahmin council takes the decisions and lets the Viceroy pass on their orders.'

Ashoka felt an inner conflict. Help Kala? Not possible. That would mean civil war and the only thing the Maharajah could do was to support Sumana. But not help Kala? Kala and Sagka could find refuge in the mountains of Darada¹ and Kabul. Kala would certainly not forsake the Takkas. That would mean a fight unto death, in which they might lose, and the tribes around Pushkalanati² would be at the mercy of the ruthless hordes of Sumana.

'We will let the Bhils and Rajputans raid Pankanada ... without conquests and plundering. Send alarming reports to Taxila. The army stays over there or will be sent to the south. Then both tribes can withdraw themselves safely into the desert.'

'The Bhils will never leave the Punjab at rest, my Raja,' Kullika spoke his thoughts aloud.

'Jala will lead them.'

'If they are caught and tortured, Sumana, and then the Maharajah, will know that you were behind it.'

'It has to happen. Tomorrow I will go to the Bhils and the Rajputans.'

Ashoka stayed for some time with Jala in order to train the Bhils and the Rajputans. Their admiration for Ashoka's supreme skills made willing pupils of them. At last, he sent Jala with a small army to the Punjab, and he himself returned to Ujjain.

Gopa's next message came a few months later: 'Campaign to the north recalled. Wild tribes in the southern Punjab fallen. Prince Sumana requests from the Maharajah considerable reinforcements of troops in the west.'

Some time later, Ashoka received a message from Nata: 'Secret meetings of the priests at the Brahmin-court. They want a strong army sent to Taxila. Were the Maharajah to fall ill again, Prince Sumana must be appointed as Crown Prince.'

Ashoka realised that he had made a mistake. A large army out in the north-west under Sumana and the Brahmins! He had to speak to the Maharajah. He organised a caravan of thirty camels and twenty ox-carts to carry all the acquired treasures to his father. Using the new road he reached the capital speedily. He first informed Sela about his arrival and then hurried with many gifts to the ladies' quarters to pay a visit to his mother and the other ranis. Mother Gopali received the most precious gift, a necklace from Sheba, made of precious gemstones in a setting of gold. The first Rani accepted it icily.

'My Ashoka,' mother Hara asked, 'People say you have brought twenty ox-carts and thirty camels carrying precious objects to the Maharajah. Are the treasures growing on trees in Ujjain?'

Ashoka laughed. 'Labour and honesty fill the treasuries of the Maharajah, Mother Hara. I brought the most valuable objects to the Maharajah to make room for new ones.'

'Then the army in Taxila can be paid with that. The rebellion grows and new troops are demanded.'

'How fortunate,' Jalini mocked, 'that the Maharajah has such rich resources.'

'Of course, it is no easy job to rule the cursed people of the west according to Brahmin laws,' Gopali excused. 'Bindusara knows whom to send there.'

'What one can do with his eyes the other cannot do even with a big army,' Samgati snapped back at her.

‘One does not become king because of his eyes or armies. The only one entitled to rule is the son of a wife of high lineage. A son of Samgati will never rule Aryavarta. That’s how the Vedas decree, it is the law of Manu,’ Gopali replied haughtily.

‘It is said that the gift to govern is to be read from the palm of the hand,’ Samgati responded, utterly calm. ‘Come here, Viceroy of Ujjain. Show mother Samgati your hand, my son.’ Samgati was a ravishing beauty and sharp-witted, but a Vaishya.

‘Unbelievable, my Raja, how rough this hand feels. If I were blind I would think that you were a dull, wild, brute ... and that is what some people claim,’ she added, with her eyes on Gopali. ‘The lines of your hand indicate just the exact opposite. Look at this line of reason and wisdom ... With you, my son, this is so strongly developed, that it even curves around the palm and appears on the back of your hand, look. And this one here is the line of goodness and compassion ... it stretches out to your wrist! Who has ever seen this! It is crossing the line of reason high up and there it continues in two branches until the fore and middle finger. The other day, I saw the hand of a person who went on a military expedition.’ Once again she looked up at Gopali before continuing, ‘where they hardly reached up to the middle of the palm, whereas the weak line of reason and wisdom remained far below. Oh, and that line of Kama ... how weak! No, the other hand had a better one: a strong deep line, crosswise across the palm. That is the worst hindrance to all rulers. No sovereign became great, my son, who squandered himself too much on women; no statesman unfolded his powers to its fullest flowering, who regarded in weak moments women as the most important. Remember, my son: Where the woman intervenes in affairs, reason succumbs and unreasonable sentiment and vanity will rule. And the most certain way to have all great undertakings fail is to forget what you have to do because of the demands of lust.’ She studied his palm again: ‘And then the line of justice ... how beautiful, firm and noble is its curve! My son, your hand promises all fortune!’

Gopali stood up, agitated. ‘Luckily, no lower woman in the harem determines who will govern, but the Maharajah, after consulting his wise Brahmins; do remember that!’ She wanted to leave the room.

‘You forget the gift the able Viceroy of Ujjain brought for you as a proof of his wise rule, my Gopali,’ Hara said while sneering.

‘Thank you, my Ashoka, I hope you may govern a long time yet in Ujjain and may collect great valuables and rule wisely; then every Maharajah would love to keep you there.’

‘Mother Gopali would love to tie you down over there,’ Hara mocked.

Gopali did not react anymore. Later it was said that she went straight to the big lotus pond in the park and there furiously threw the precious necklace into the water, so that it sank deep into the sub-terrestrial empire of the Nagas. The Nagas placed it at the entrance to their dark dwellings, where Ashoka’s gift gave by its brilliance a golden glow to the dark waters around the lotuses, which never faded after that.

While Ashoka was telling Subhadrangi about his beautiful young wife and his children in the far west, one of the female palace guards appeared and informed him that the Maharajah awaited him. The magician fanned the flames of the holy fires high, while an armoured guard of honour was placed all around. Khallataka and Sayana had each taken a seat next to the throne of the Maharajah.

‘What compels my brave and capable son to undertake a journey as far as Pataliputra? And will the affairs be handled well in Ujjain when the Viceroy is absent?’

‘Shiva sometimes ponders on Mount Meru, my Father. Why should He not serve me as an example, and let me reflect now and then on what I have done? I wished, in the first place, to bring you myself the valuable treasures I collected for you in Ujjain as income, and some as gifts to me personally. If it pleases you, I will show them to you.’

Ashoka had the merchandise brought in and the three men were astounded at the riches that were paraded before their eyes.

‘My dear son seems to have set as his aim the execution of my orders with the greatest accuracy. That is why I was most surprised that he had sent warlike tribes to the south of the Punjab.’

The three great men looked at Ashoka in keen anticipation, evidently observing what impact this remark made on the Prince. Not a trace of surprise was to be seen, however, at Bindusara’s knowledge of his secret deed in the West. With a most gentle smile, he responded:

‘I did not want the Viceroy of Taxila to undo all my work in Darada, and neither that the Takkas, who subjected themselves with such sincerity and so earnestly to the Maharajah of Aryavarta, should be victims because

of the narrow-mindedness of Sumana or his council; neither did I want my greatest friend, Prince Kala, to be pursued and imprisoned by an army which, given its dissoluteness and misevaluation of the western people, would do nothing but bring harm to your authority which had only just been restored. I wished to thwart the army commanders, so that they would give up their silly plans of warfare. I gave strict orders to my friends not to harm anyone, nor start any conflict. But should you give in to the request of my brother—which means his council—to send a strong army, a war in the north-west would be unavoidable. And do you know what Antiochus of Syria will do in that case? What do you then desire, my beloved Father: that I once again proceed to Taxila to set right the mistakes of Sumana and his council? I have warned you. I know Taxila. You, yourself, certainly know the results of this dangerous experiment with your oldest son. Now, I have to warn you again, not to place large armies in the service of Sumana or his council.

That is the second reason why I came to see you.

You have been seriously ill, my Father; and, because of the sacrificial priests, great pressure is brought upon the Maharajah to appoint at last Sumana, about whom consistently good information was fed to you, as Crown Prince.'

'You are wonderfully well informed, my son.'

'Did you expect less from me, or to be misinformed? I strung the bow Gandiwa and shot it, O, Maharajah. Well, I know that the most important priests of the Brahmin-court have decided at a solemn meeting, to urge you to send the largest number of troops possible to Sumana in the west. Is that what you wish for? If the gods again demand sacrifices for the recovery of the Maharajah, those sacrifices will indicate that Sumana has to be Crown Prince!' Ashoka hesitated with his next words: 'After you have agreed to that, my Father, your life will no longer have any value to them. And worse, it will be a hindrance, lest your decision be reversed. Two Princes of our house, who side with Sumana, are army commanders here; three others are in the west. They are keeping their men ready for Sumana. I believe that I have to warn you, in all seriousness, about this development of events. That is the third reason for my visit.'

'When did that meeting take place, my young Raja?'

'During Chaitra, on the day of the new moon.'

‘Do you know about this meeting, Khallataka?’

‘People assiduously keep from me all matters that concern the succession, Maharajah. I believe it is time to honestly and straightforwardly appoint the heir to the throne, to put an end to the subversive activities of the Brahmin-court.’

‘And what has my wise Sayana to say about these things. Let us suppose that the information provided by the Viceroy is correct.’

‘My young friend from the forest hermitage gathers his information so keenly that his own views may throw light on the matter.’

‘Well, my son, it will please your three best friends to hear your opinion.’

‘Since you, great Maharajah, and my wise friend Sayana and my highly respected Khallataka, like to hear my assessment, then listen: do not appoint Sumana. He is not capable of ruling a world empire, and the life of the Maharajah would not be safe any longer. Do not appoint me either, for then perhaps, I would lose my Father’s trust in me and that would be for me a loss, greater than anything else. Keep your army in your hands in Pataliputra, if you want the Mauryas to continue their rule. I can use my influence with Vimalamitra, the Takkas, the Kashmiras and other peoples, to lessen the injurious effects of the instigators from the capital of your empire in the west.’

Sayana acknowledged happily: ‘Well, my highly revered Maharajah, I could not have given better advice, unless I had advised that Raja Ashoka be straightway appointed as the heir to the throne. His advice seems wiser to me.’

‘My son, you are a worthy pupil of Kullika and Sayana.’

‘And the true Maurya,’ thought Khallataka.

After Ashoka had left, Sayana asked: ‘What does my highly revered Maharajah think about this son?’

‘He is for me like Surya, at times concealed from being seen by Maruts, but his radiance always triumphs.’

‘The human mind is like the elephant in the jungle, O, Maharajah; nature weaves her vines, her strong unbreakable bonds. Then comes the elephant and they are torn to shreds: the path through the jungle is free. The eternal laws of the Atman cannot be crushed by petty human forces. Your

son is the subtle spirit, the *sara*, the essence of all that stands opposed to the pressures of the priests and the greedy Kshatriyas.'

'Exactly, my Sayana,' added Khallataka. 'Greatness is not solely the domain of great people, but of humanity as a whole: *Tat Tvam Asi*. The great ones amongst human beings shape the form of all that is at work in everyone, of the lofty ideas flourishing in the whole of humanity, like the blossoming crown atop the *areka*'³.

Sela had taken care to see that the holy fire in the Shiva-temple was blazing high up into the sky with a startlingly bright glow. There was no doubt that the sacrifice of this day was extremely welcome to the god of life and death.

When Ashoka, seated on the imperial elephant—on the order of the Maharajah—rode into the camp, a heavy gong sounded.

'Raja Ashoka!' Sela called out, and like a peal of thunder, the call vibrated through the dwellings of the warriors. All hurried towards the Emperor's road to see the commander, the Lord of three worlds, maybe, Shiva himself. The rough warriors stretched out their hands towards the young Raja and bowed deeply.

When Ashoka, ever in empathy with the soldiers, once more took command and received heartily cheered victories, both his half-brothers, Sampadi and Savadra—who, like most of the high-born warriors, sided with Sumana—appeared with their entourage. Prince Sampadi, intemperate like his famous brother, rode towards him.

'Ashoka, I protest, that the section of the army under my command is being led by you!'

'How happy I am to see you again after such a long absence, my brother Sampadi. Thank you for your most friendly welcome. What brings you here so early?'

'I do not wish to be superseded in command, not even by the Viceroy of Ujjain!'

'You forget, honoured Sampadi, that my Father has not yet dismissed me as chief commander of the army, and that you are my subordinate. Who commands the army unit, Sampadi?'

'One who is appointed by the Maharajah.'

'That is a shrewd answer! I will correct you: The one who is obeyed! Shall we see who is obeyed, you or I?'

‘No!’

‘Let us then see who is the best warrior, you or me! Which weapon do you prefer, Sampadi, the chakra? Let us then take as target Shakuni, who is hiding behind you.’

For one short moment, Sampadi was beside himself then he turned around. Shakuni rushed forward, fuming, and screamed: ‘I am a Brahmin and I will not let myself be used as a target by a killer of Brahmins, who has already killed three priests.’

A great excitement swept through the gathering. Ashoka raised his hand calmly, and a tense silence followed.

‘And I, the chief commander, will not let myself be accused by a violator of his guru’s bed, by an escaped prisoner who is sentenced by my father for slander of a Maurya Prince and who deserves a death sentence for escaping from the mines. Sela, capture that young man and lead him again to the Maharajah!’

Sampadi flew into a temper: ‘No one from my party will be taken prisoner!’

Because of the great tumult, only Ashoka had heard him. He snapped back: ‘Seal your mouth, or I will have a Maurya Prince, who dares to take a criminal under his protection, imprisoned, too!’

Sampadi thought Ashoka capable of anything and so kept silent.

‘Let us see if our beloved elephants have better memories of us, Sela.’

The Viceroy blew his whistle the way he used to do. What happened next greatly surprised all. Several animals suddenly lifted their trunks and started trumpeting. A few ambled up to their old friend. Ashoka dismounted and walked towards them.

‘Oh, Sampa! Come here. And Kalana, you look so well! Here, eat!’ Together with a sweet, each got a friendly word. One of the animals stayed behind, swung his trunk up and down impatiently, and softly trumpeted now and then. The Raja approached him.

‘Well, Lampa, are you nervous, old gabber?’

‘Lampa’s foot is hurt, high Raja.’

‘Who is taking care of him?’

‘Nobody dares to touch him; he gets wild with rage because of his pain, Sire.’

‘Bring pure water, steamed cotton and balm for the wound.’ First, Lampa got his sweet. Then the Raja made him place his foot on a small stool, examined the wound himself and cleaned it in spite of Lampa’s trumpeting in pain. In complete trust, the elephant kept his foot on the stool. Ashoka then put the balm on the cleansed wound and bandaged it with utmost care.

‘Well, Lampa, now it will heal. Good animal.’ Ashoka caressed his trunk. When he left again, Lampa trudged behind him. A guard wanted to stop him.

‘Let him!’ At the end of the elephant camp, the Raja took leave of him. The animal stood staring after his friend a long time. When the Prince was out of sight it returned, disappointed, to its stable.

The chiefs of the various army sections treated Ashoka with respect, but for the rest, they were very reserved. He knew what that meant.

‘Sela, I have to speak to you.’

They looked for an isolated place in the jungle.

‘Well, Sela?’

‘Khallataka thinks that if something serious should happen, the army will be happy to be taken over by you, provided you are declared as the Maharajah. I have suggested that on the day that death takes the Maharajah, all that stands against you be sent to *Yama*⁴. An army regiment, by nature, obeys its commanders.’

‘Then, surely, imprison those and move them to a secure place under a strong, trustworthy guard. And then all will depend on whether you will get immediate replacements to take command. That is the most important thing, my Sela.’

‘Nobody will accept my orders.’

‘Then we have to take Khallataka into our confidence. He appoints you as Commander-in-Chief. Moreover, I hope to be in Pataliputra soon, and then it will be: Either on the elephant or ... in Ganga’s lap.’

‘And what if the Maharajah were to choose Sumana as the Crown Prince?’

‘That will change nothing of our plans.’

‘And the Princes, Sire?’

‘Depart. Or, you move them to the prison-camp as well.’

‘And if I myself may be slain, Sire?’

‘Appoint a few successors of whom only one is allowed to know that he has to succeed my Sela in an emergency. And the army?’

‘Adores Shiva, Sire.’

‘One more order, my Sela. Nothing may go against the orders of the Maharajah. In case my Father chooses Sumana as successor, then you will, together with Satyavat and Nata, take your own measures for the Maharajah’s protection. For woe unto him, whose death may be useful for the sacrificial priests! The Maharajah ought to be the highest and most sacred power in Aryavarta, not the priests.’

They mounted their horses again and rode back to the camp. A moment later a different horseman left. It was Girika who had followed them from a distance and had approached, without being heard, through hidden animal tracks in the thick bushes.

Immediately after the visit to the army camp the Prince rode to Khallataka’s dwelling, where he was received with friendliness and respect.

‘The messages from Ujjain are very favourable to you. Those from Taxila merely confirm your earlier predictions. The Brahmins create an image of Sumana as a capable governor. Everything is proceeding to full satisfaction.’

‘Indeed, they have my brother exactly the way they want him. I know a little about his daily occupations.’

‘The Maharajah knows, too; Aradra and Udra drew the attention of the Maharajah to the favourable turn the life of Prince Sumana had taken. Then the Maharajah explained to the council of ministers how things really are in Taxila. The Prince is a toy in the hands of his council. It is the council of priests that is governing and they perform sacrifices on a large scale; the people are dissatisfied but fear the soldiers. Even with many large army units, it is difficult to maintain peace and quiet in the west ... The time is more than ripe, my Raja, to show a certain concession to the priests at the Brahmin-court. If you would do so, then everyone will acknowledge you as the Crown Prince. Let the priests perform an offering, confer on them a generous fee, and friendship will be forged. Your Father, too, does respect them, because he needs them, but ultimately follows his own path.’

‘I am aware of your good intention, my honoured Khallataka. But I have not changed my stand. Never will I curse the Bhils, Rajputans, Kashmiras, Daradas, Takkas and Yavanas and so many others, to win the

favour of these vicious priests. Before I become the Maharajah, I will deal with them. They view my faults too big, and I, theirs.'

Khallataka sat, his face bent down. He felt the young Maurya was in his right but could see no possibility of realising his plans. A Maharajah, with only a part of the army, without anointment, without priests, without sacrifices, without the people! Was not this as the holy Ganga without water!

'You made a dangerous choice, noble Khallataka, when you sided with me,' the Viceroy went on. 'Even now you can return to Sumana and his friends. I will not hold that against you: how can one deny his inner convictions! I know my struggle is not against a person as insignificant as Sumana, but against them who see in him their profits and their power. That struggle I wish, and I will fight. To compromise would be a betrayal of my best friends. Chandragupta and Bindusara bowed to their yoke, Sumana will let himself be trampled. I wish the sacrificial priest to bow low before the Maharajah because only he can create and serve the happiness for the whole of Aryavarta. That is essential.'

'You are right. Count on me, my Raja.'

Ashoka then explained to the minister what he and Sela had discussed, and Khallataka fully concurred. Then the Raja took leave of him and had himself announced to his father.

'You have used your time well, my son,' Ashoka looked up at him questioningly. 'But what if I relieve Sela from the army ... and his successors ... Or, I destroy his prisoners' camp ... What does my son think to do then?'

'Trust myself and the army.'

'Is the army on your side?'

'When my Father would no longer be Maharajah ... yes.'

'You are playing a dangerous game of dice, my son!'

'I do not play; I fight for the Mauryas and the peoples of your empire!'

'You lean heavily upon my favouring you, my son. And then what if I dismiss Khallataka ... exile from Pataliputra ... Then the army is in my hands alone.'

'It remains in your hand as long as you wish and as long as you live, my Father.'

'And what if I then make Sumana the Crown Prince?'

‘Then, the Maharajah might need my protection.’

‘Sure, sure! ... Sela, Nata, Satyavat ...

‘You are wonderfully informed, my Father.’

‘My son, I need to know the true motives behind your three serious suggestions. The history of Aryavarta knows too many examples of Princes who did not know how to bide their time.’ Bindusara remarked sharply.

‘A great Maharajah like you is entitled to know all my motives. I never concealed them from you, my Father. Tell me if you know another way out!’

‘But a king needs the priests for his people.’

‘As long as they have the interests of the people in mind and not that of their own! ...’

‘Perhaps, they think more of our well-being than the Prince is inclined to believe.’

‘They do not think, they act.’

‘For you, they are enemies, who control the people.’

‘There is more opposition to their unnatural coercion than they might be aware of. Life, in the end, asks for its right to be, when, by corrupt belief or false morality, it is more and more restricted. Then the eternal Atman breaks through and mocks the selfish, petty bigotries. The people of Aryavarta lack the awareness of a path, and the vigour of a spirit, strong enough to guide the divine urges of their Atman. I want to give them that path and that strength.’

‘Where to? Where to?’

‘From the Terai swamps of priestly wilfulness to a holy Ganga of pure truthfulness and humanity, that will flow through a happy country.’

‘You sent me Shakuni. I have had him led back immediately to the mines in the Himalaya and he is now heavily guarded.’

‘May Shiva save him for my *chakra*.’

‘How large is your army in Ujjain, my son?’

‘As large as I choose, my Father. Rajputans, Bhils, Takkas and other tribes would shout with joy if they were allowed into my army. I do not want a powerful army because I do not need one. To rule people is easy, as long as it is done with justice and unshakeable willpower. But a priest does not understand justice and does not believe in the unshakeable willpower of the other.’

‘Your struggle will not be easy!’



4

THE ORDEAL

Some time after his visit to Pataliputra, the pilgrim Sundara appeared at the court of Ashoka. Ashoka wanted Kullika and Vasumitra to be present at the meeting.

Sundara watched them with distrust.

‘This is Vasumitra, my most trusted minister and this is Kullika, my Purohita. I do not have secrets for them, revered Sundara. Their mouths are closed like the lotus of daytime is at night. So hold nothing back and tell us what has brought you to the Viceroy.’

‘I live at the Brahmin-court in Pataliputra, high Raja. Chandaka and his council are greatly concerned about the developments in the west. They think an uprising cannot be averted now that the Maharajah has refused to despatch more troops there. They think only one man can restore peace and quiet and that is you, high Raja. We know the relationship between you and the Brahmin-court is not good. This could be made more desirable if you would but make some overture.’

‘Who sent you here, revered Sundara?’

‘No one, Sire. I am on a pilgrimage.’

‘And the Maharajah?’

‘He hardly knows Sundara, Sire. Chandaka, the leader of the Brahmin-court, knows that you, high Raja, have a great influence over the army in Pataliputra. The worship of Shiva has spread widely and he thinks it is because of you. Moreover, the people in Ujjain appear to be highly pleased with the new Viceroy. So, if you would take on a different attitude towards the Brahmin-court ...’

‘And that of the Brahmin-court towards me?’ Could it be Khallataka’s hand behind this meeting?

‘That is correct, honoured Raja, then the affairs in this country could be ruled more easily.’

‘How does Chandaka imagine he can do this, revered Sundara?’

‘If you would enter into certain pacts with the Brahmin-court, O, Raja, then we could suggest to the Maharajah that Prince Sumana be recalled and you made the Viceroy of the entire west.’

‘And what if the Maharajah refuses?’

‘The Brahmin-court would be on your side. The situation is very perilous ... Maybe, you can compel the Maharajah ...’

‘Oh, so you say, compel the Maharajah, Sundara!’

‘Even if the Brahmin-court refuses ... The army in Pataliputra ...’

‘Aha! And then?’

‘If you then also control the whole west with its Rajputans, Bhils, Takkas and other warrior people, then you control Aryavarta, O, Raja.’

‘That, to me, borders on rather simple thinking, revered Sundara.’

‘The army in Pataliputra is at your command, after all.’

‘And then?’

‘And then, it is up to you. Aryavarta needs a powerful ruler.’

‘And the Brahmin-court?’

‘Given certain conditions ...’

‘You mean that I, if necessary, could arrogate sovereignty!’

‘You say it, not me, high and wise Raja. It has happened before in India. I would not venture to advise you so, but ...’

‘But?’

‘No one would offer resistance because you are a capable army chief and a wise ruler.’

‘Not even the Maharajah?’

‘Not even the Maharajah,’ the priest whispered.

‘But I do not wish to be dependant on the Brahmin-court.’

The priest continued carefully: ‘That will be a delicate point, high Raja. However, I am wholly convinced of your abilities. You could, if need be, do it without the priests. Sayana and Khallataka seem to be fully by your side.’ Ashoka glanced up at Kullika, who looked disconcerted.

‘Ajatashatru ...’

‘Think not of that, high Raja. The mighty Chandragupta abdicated when he was still in the full bloom of his life.’

‘Yes, but what if Bindusara should refuse?’

‘The moment you are in control, everything depends on you.’

‘Yes, yes!’ Ashoka beat the heavy gong three times and three servants rushed in without making any sound.

‘Kansa and Salya, guard this priest. You, Darga, get Pala and twenty riders. Do not move, Sundara, my chakra never fails and is sharp.’

Sundara stood still, his cheeks ashen.

‘Pala, take this priest in an ox-cart to the Maharajah. Vasumitra, would you do me a great favour? Accompany him to Pataliputra. You were a witness. Inform the Maharajah what this priest suggested to me and will you assure my father again of my unwavering loyalty!’

The priest was carried off.

‘The Brahmin-court wished to lure you into a trap, my Raja. When Sundara said, ‘if need be, without the priests’, there he made his mistake.’

‘Or, a conspired mistake of ... well, let us wait and see.’

‘Does my Raja long to join that dance of death?’

‘I do not wish to, Kullika, but I shall be there when the dance begins.’

‘Here, you have a beautiful country, a wife and children who make you happy. Here, you can work as well and nobody longs for your death. Pataliputra is a nasty wasps’ nest.’

‘There are powers at work within man which can be subdued by no force in the world because they are part of the Atman, and so, of all, my Kullika.’

‘Think of Buddha’s first precept, O, Raja.’

‘If I obey it, others will trample it. What difference does it make? It is better that I take the lead.’

Along with a caravan from Taxila, a representation of merchants arrived, led by Kampaka, a former minister of Ashoka.

‘Sir, Vimalamitra has died. Prince Kala stays with the Takkas. Gopa says the Viceroy there has hardly any idea what is happening. His council decides about all that goes on in Taxila. It is the cruelty of the army that still stays the hand of the people. The trade in Taxila dies like the jungle in *Grishma*¹. The Iranians, Syrians and Egyptians, are treated as if they are leprous. Artisans, slaves, sarthavahas, roam around the streets without a purpose. The taxes are too heavy to bear. We are only permitted to erect wooden buildings, as in Madhyadesa. Every resistance is punished with severe torture and death. The country lives in mute resentment. Only one word and the West will be plunged into the fires of war. Complaints to the Maharajah do not help.’

‘What is that one word, Kampaka?’

‘Ashoka! Sir, all the people of the Punjab and Kashmir included, are poised to heed your call. Bactrians and Iranians will, if you wish or need, come to your help. I hear the south-west is very favourably disposed towards you. Do we have to continue to bear being governed by a Prince who is controlled by an assembly of enemies? No one, O, mighty Raja, can stand against you. Save us!’

‘There is just one insurmountable obstacle, Kampaka: your oath of loyalty, and mine, to the Maharajah. In the monsoon, when the nectar of heaven is feeding the world, it is easy for the banyan to grow. But in Jyeshtha, the hottest month, he proves his strength and endurance.

‘The oath of loyalty by a people means an oath of protection by the King, Sire. Your reign alone was like a shower of fresh rain over our barren farmlands. Our country is becoming impoverished; our people become criminals instead of useful workers.’

Ashoka contemplated Kampaka’s words with Kullika. He knew that Bindusara would not recall the Council because of the Brahmin-court. Neither would he declare Sumana’s incapability. Only a strong Sumana he would fear. Yet, Ashoka wanted to help. Both of them left for Bharuchkacha to talk to the merchants of the west. On their journey to the port city, when they had made their camp at a valley in the Vindhya-mountains, they came across a scraggly caravan of miserable, dismal-looking camels, which was on its way to Ujjain with a small quantity of sandalwood. The sarthavaha

told the Viceroy that *Dakshina*², in the Deccan, was ravaged by a drought, resulting in famine, because there had been no rains in the past years. Food was scarcely available and the demons of pestilence and famine were lurking. Only food grains could save them.

‘Would it not be better that we first take care of the situation in Dakshina, my Purohita?’

‘The land does not belong to the Maharajah, Sire. Taxila and your own interests ask for priority.’

‘Your Buddha’s first precept does not consider land or interest, my Kullika. But maybe, we can help in another way.’

Immediately a messenger was sent to Ujjain. Fifty ox-carts were loaded at Mahishmati on the Narmada with grain from the Maharajah’s granaries and dispatched as immediate relief. His own chief, Tshunda, would take care of the distribution so the grains could not be sold in the marketplace.

In Bharuchkacha, Achala assembled the foreign merchants and the Taxilans. Ashoka wanted to route the Iranian trade over Bharuchkacha and Ujjain. Ujjain was a holy city for the Brahmin council and its caravans had free entry into Taxila.

When Vasumitra arrived in Pataliputra with his prisoner, he was received that very night by the Maharajah.

‘What is it that the noble Vasumitra has to report to the Emperor of Aryavarta?’

‘Gracious and Most Revered Maharajah, the Viceroy of Ujjain sends along a prisoner to you, an inmate of the Brahmin-court of Pataliputra. This priest wanted to persuade the Raja to usurp supreme power in your empire.’

The Maharajah suddenly turned to the prisoner: ‘And was my son amenable to your treacherous speech, Girika?’

‘Gracious Maharajah, this prisoner called himself Sundara, a pilgrim.’

‘Well, Sundara, answer me.’

‘No, Sire. I made it plain to the Raja that he needed only to lift a finger and the whole of Aryavarta would be at his feet. But he imprisoned me as a traitor.’

‘Why did not my son listen to the evil tongue of Sundara, my Vasumitra?’

‘Well, gracious Maharajah, he felt bound by his oath of loyalty.’

‘And if he had not sworn that oath, would he then have been agreeable to Sundara’s proposition?’

‘No!’

‘You seem very convinced. Why not?’

‘He demands strict obedience and truthfulness from his servants and is never deficient in them himself, gracious Maharajah.’

‘So you think it is impossible the Raja would take action in Taxila?’

‘When you have ordered. But not otherwise. The unity of the country and the supreme power of the Maharajah are as sacred to him as Shiva’s home on Kailash.’

The Maharajah sighed deeply and kept silent for a moment.

‘How large is his army, Mahamatra Vasumitra?’

‘A few hundred soldiers. But thousands of Rajputans and Bhils and Takkas would be only too eager to join the army.’

‘To track the caravans?’

‘For whatever the Raja chooses. But he does not want war. There is prosperity everywhere. Our happiness means more to him than an exhibition of power.’

‘You know my son well?’

‘I daily praise the gods and the Maharajah who sent him our way. ‘True as Ashoka’, ‘honest as Ashoka’, ‘just as Ashoka’, are expressions which are flowering in Ujjain, mighty Maharajah.’

‘Take Girika to his place, Sari. And you Vasumitra are my guest. I shall put Sundara on trial ...’

Bindusara treated Vasumitra with great respect. The Emperor’s mind was put at rest ... until the Brahmin ministers and priests would once again awaken the slumbering serpent of distrust inside his heart.

Vasumitra expressed amazement that the Emperor had shown so little interest in the crime of Sundara and so much more in the way the Viceroy had responded to it.

At nightfall, Ashoka asked: ‘And what does my Kullika now think of the Sundara case?’

‘The same that you think, my Raja ...’

Ashoka had taken care that there were established a great number of horse-posts on the new road from Ujjain to Pataliputra and that fast travel speeded up the conveyance of information. Immediately after the return of

Vasumitra, he began to receive information about new developments of every kind. Satyavat reported:

‘The Maharajah has ordered Prince Sumana to come to the capital. Bindusara wants him to marry soon and stay for some time at Sayana’s.’

From Sela: ‘The Maharajah knows what we talked about. I am under the keen observance of some heavily armed spies. I designated Radhagupta as the Chief commander in case I fall in battle.’

Some weeks later, word from Gopa: ‘The Maharajah has intervened. The Viceroy suddenly left for Pataliputra. The trade to Ujjain has improved a great deal and that to Iran has become easier. Representatives of the Council have been sent to Sangala to establish peace with the Takkas.’

‘If the Maharajah would leave the West to you, the problems would be solved and happiness gained for Malwa, Sindh and the Punjab.’

‘And Magadha, and Kosala, and the entire Madhyadesa?’

‘He who wants to carry the heavy priest on his back should not complain when he staggers under the load.’

‘That thought is not in accordance with Buddha’s first precept, my Kullika. Do you want to hand over Madhyadesa to the sacrificial priests?’

‘You are right, Sire, but a blood-strife between brothers could be worse.’

‘My brother is of no account. Devi goes to Vidisha to give birth to her third child. I will bring her there myself and stay for a while with Subhadra and wait for news from Pataliputra. Sumana’s presence in the capital makes me restless. Maybe, I may suddenly have to depart for Pataliputra. If a struggle is sparked off, I might fall as well. What would my Kullika do then?’

‘Sire, as loyally as I have served you and loved you, I will serve and love her and her children.’

‘Mind well that my death would mean immediate danger to my son.’

‘The Vindhya are vast and many there worship Shiva, Lord.’

‘I thank you, my Kullika.’

‘The gods will not forsake you, Lord.’

‘We bow to the gods but keep the reins of the chariot in our own hands, Kullika.’



TWO SPIES

At the rear of the park, behind the Palace in Pataliputra, was the home of Satyavat, the overseer of the ponds and parks, his wife Rohini, and their two little sons. In front of the house was a small pond, in which a soft pink lotus spread out its petals. Between the dark-green leaves were the buds seeking light and the flowers blushed when Surya's rays kissed them in the early morning. As dusk fell, and the inky black night rose from the earth, and moved into the thick shrubs and bushes before slowly climbing up to the crowns of the *Areka* palms that enclosed the park by the side of the River Son, Rohini awaited her husband while musing on her salvation and good fortune. She thought of her saviour, the 'ugly Wild Prince', but also, with fear, of Sumana. It so happened that once as Sumana walked through the park his eyes caught sight of her and followed her to her house. Luckily, Satyavat was in the house and requested him to leave her alone. Sumana, however, demanded that Satyavat should go. Her husband then warned that he would go straight to the Maharajah to ask whether Sumana was entitled to lay claims on his wife. Then the Prince left. Now he was on his way to Pataliputra. Why? Certainly, Prince Ashoka would like to know what was going on between the Maharajah and Sumana. Jala, the chief gatekeeper, would never let anybody get close to the audience hall. Never, not even Nata, the chief of the female palace guards; nor would the guards reveal a

word of the happenings inside as that would undoubtedly cost them their lives if the Emperor came to know of it. They often visited Rohini but guarded their secrets jealously. Once Mutri, a palace guard who resembled Rohini like a sister, remarked:

‘You would be a comely guard in the uniform of a palace sentry, Rohini.’

Rohini laughed: ‘Let me try it on once, Mutri, people say we look a lot like each other.’

‘Alright, but take care that no one notices.’

Everyone agreed that none of the guards could vie with Rohini and that she could easily, without arousing anybody’s suspicions, be mistaken for Mutri. It was about this matter that she was musing as she sat on the bench near the lotus pond waiting for her husband. She heard hurried steps. It was Satyavat, who immediately sat down on the bench beside Rohini, obviously fatigued.

‘I see no way of observing the meeting,’ he whispered. ‘Jala remained adamant. Nata has no idea how. I even risked to ask Sela to go to Khallataka for this specific purpose. His only answer was, ‘Do not ask me to work as a spy’.’

‘What if I could attend the meeting of the Maharajah and his son?’

Satyavat looked at her, dismayed. ‘Foolishness ...’

‘In the uniform of Mutri.’

‘Foolishness!’ He repeated, raising his voice this time.

‘Not as foolish as you think. According to the other guards I look exactly like Mutri.’

‘Everyone will notice the deception immediately and you would be sentenced right away.’

‘Prince Ashoka, my Satyavat!’

‘That sacrifice he will not accept!’

‘But we wish to do it! It is for him! Tomorrow, when Mutri comes by, I will ask her. If you recognise the deception straight away we will have to look for something else.’

‘Nata will not allow it. His job – nay, his life is at stake!’

‘I go along with it,’ Nata whispered, just behind them. Satyavat and Rohini jumped up, startled. ‘But be careful that you discuss all that concerns Ashoka with great caution inside your house. I perceived several

times someone close by your house. Attempt it, Rohini, I really see no other way. And all of us are true to the Maharajah until death. Who will find out! I have noticed that Jala hardly looks at the guards.'

The next morning some of the guards visited Rohini. They played with her little sons.

'Is it really true I resemble Mutri so much? Am I that pretty?'

'Oh, even more, Rohini!'

'Let us fool Satyavat!' This suggestion was received with cheerful applause. They exchanged their clothes and called in Satyavat.

'So, Mutri, you take a stance as though you have to guard the holy Maharajah here.' Everyone laughed delightedly.

'Why do you call me in, mother Rohini?'

'We feel that today Rohini looks so much like Mutri. What do you think, Satyavat?'

'She always does.'

'Satyavat, mind you, make no mistake ... That can lead to unwitting adultery.' Rohini walked towards him and hugged him.

'Ugh, Mutri!'

Rohini took Satyavat by his arm and whispered:

'Do ask Nata if I could do sentry duty at the palace for one day.'

Satyavat was startled and only now he recognised his mistake.

'Let me do duty tomorrow at the meeting of Sumana and the Maharajah, Mutri!'

'Nata will kill us if he comes to know.'

'He will not come to know. I will serve with dedication.'

'And then I'll be Rohini. How happy Satyavat will be! If we are uncovered we will simply deny we are the other then it remains as it is!' joked Mutri. The appeal of the prank and the daring of it thrilled both.

'Maybe, I will ask Nata. He is a loyal friend of Satyavat and the head of the guards.'

Fright intermingled with fun but they took the risk, because Rohini seemed to wish it so much. Yet, nobody felt at ease when a day later Rohini took over Mutri's place. Mutri waited in Satyavat's house, shivering. What if the Maharajah discovered! Rohini kept herself well and repressed her curiosity in the new surroundings. She was inclined to look at her friends

and quite a few furtive glances were cast on her. She realised how dangerous it was to draw attention to herself. Even the Maharajah, who always looked at his guards for a short moment but for the rest never paid attention to them, seemed to stare at her a little longer.

Fortunately, Khallataka and Sayana entered. After they had seated themselves next to the Maharajah he ordered the Prince to come in.

What if Sumana recognised her! She had not thought of that. Rohini tried to bolster her confidence to hide a little more behind her friends but it was forbidden to move even one muscle. She beheld how Sumana knelt down before the Maharajah and remained on his knees. The Maharajah greeted him sternly and briefly.

‘How are events in the west?’

‘Very well, my Father.’

‘Very well! What did you do to conduct the people towards peace and obedience?’

‘I? Well, I am their king, my Father!’

‘Indeed! Because you are ...’

‘My ministers make the rules and I approve of what they decide.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘My deportment was such as was expected of a king.’

‘How did you deport yourself?’

‘I came out to present myself before the people, riding the royal elephant. I had the decrees of my ministers sealed. I inhabited in my palace and received the envoys. I organised feasts for the important people of the country and took care that everyone regards with respect your Viceroy.

‘And that is how you kept peace?’

‘My army takes care of that, High Father.’

‘And the people? Do they praise your wise reign?’

‘What my ministers do, the king does. They proclaim repeatedly that I am a good king.’

‘So, you degrade yourself, Maurya, into a spineless toy, an inanimate instrument of your ministers.’

‘The King is the King and will only debase himself when he performs inferior labour, High Father.’

‘Do you call, ruling yourself, investigating yourself, leading the army yourself and reviving the prosperity of the people yourself, inferior?’

‘For a king, not for his officers.’

‘You know the history of our house poorly, Sumana! Taxila has a university. Do you know many scholars?’

‘Vidu has taught me what I need to know to become the Maharajah. I do not wish to pay more attention to the sciences. That is the duty of the Brahmins; such is also the opinion of my ministers.’

‘And of the chiefs of the troops?’

‘My brothers are eminently qualified in the art of warfare. A king should uphold his regal dignity. The throne is a shrine, not a field of war.’

‘And you ensure that the people are led justly, humanely? Are they obedient?’

‘My ministers do not tolerate disobedience from an accursed people, easily led to rebel.’

‘Cursed by whom?’

‘By the Vedas and the venerable Brahmins.’

‘Also, by the Emperor? When you departed for the west I ordered you to rule with justice, wisdom, and leniency.’

‘Leniency they see as a weakness, which leads to rebellion. The power with which my ministers rule is wisdom. That is their justice, too. And I am their King.’

Bindusara understood the parroting of the responses. He knew that behind it lie hidden the enormous power against which he felt he could barely cope, though he knew how to keep it in check. Sumana was their puppet, not because of lack of manas but because of lack of willpower. The only one who could stand up against it ... he did not entrust his interests. Bindusara sighed; it irritated him, that submissiveness of his offspring and of the oldest son.

‘Do you visit Gopa’s place frequently? Do you gamble much? Do you drink more than is good?’

Startled, Sumana rose but shrank before Bindusara’s gaze. Rohini and her friends stood motionless as the statues and cameos on the columns in the audience hall. Rohini, however, grew so agog that she stirred slightly, sending the arrows in her quiver wobbling. For a fraction of a second Bindusara looked at her. Sumana was desperately searching for an answer

to the questions. His eyes travelled vacuously over the big hall, then met Rohini's. She went pale and her legs almost failed to support her. He recognised her, stared at her briefly, and in doing so it was as if his mind cleared suddenly.

'Is it forbidden to the Viceroy to enjoy the pleasures of life, noble Maharajah?'

'As long as you do not harm your dignity! A king is expected to work hard and enjoy with moderation. Do you enjoy with moderation, Raja of Taxila?'

'I do not know, my Father ...'

'And do you work hard, as the *Arthashastra* demands?'

'I do not know what you call hard work.'

'So, for those two questions your ministers have not supplied you with the answers! In a week from now you will marry Aradi, daughter of the minister, Arada. She knows what she wants and what I demand from you and expect of you. For the coming week you will reside in the hermitage of the wise Sayana across the Ganga.'

'My Father, how can you, within just a week, arrange the festivities for the wedding of the Crown Prince?'

'I, the Maharajah, will decide who is going to be Crown Prince. And the festivities, I will determine.'

Again, Sumana's eyes wandered off towards Rohini.

Towards nightfall, Sumana appeared at Satyavat's house and asked to be let in. Satyavat responded that the Viceroy was permitted to enter but that thereafter he would go straight to the Maharajah. Rohini was sitting with both her little sons, not far from the entrance.

'Does your wife serve as a palace guard, Satyavat?' he asked laughingly. 'Does my father permit as palace guards those who are so closely connected to his servants? We will ask him, Satyavat.'

'You must have mistaken her for Mutri, high Raja. She resembles Rohini much.' Sumana then left, humming. He lacked the energy to probe further into this impersonation.

Early the next morning, Satyavat, after consultation with Nata, left in the guise of a priest for Sayana's hermitage and asked for hospitality. He was a silent priest, who preferred to listen rather than talk, and therefore became a silent witness to the discussions between Sayana and the Raja.

‘And how does my friend, Sumana, like the calm of my hermitage?’

‘Not so much, venerable Sayana. My father sent me here because he is not pleased with my governing. What is it that one desires of me besides my being a good king?’

‘What is your governing like?’

‘Do ask my ministers’ council when they return to Pataliputra, venerable Sayana. They direct all the activities related to governing the damned country.’

‘Maybe, you would rather talk to the great scholars of the University of Taxila. Whom do you know? I know some, too.’

‘I do not know any of them, wise Sayana.’

‘So, probably you attempt to get to know the people of the West?’

‘I do not wish to get to know these accursed peoples, wise Sayana.’

‘Well then, perhaps merchants or travellers from far-away foreign countries?’

‘My council prefers to keep the foreign merchants outside the country. They concern themselves with the trade of foreign trash. We do not tolerate sacrilegious objects.’

‘And are you content with the soldiers who have joined you from the capital?’

‘My brothers take care of them, wise Sayana.’

‘And what is it that you did, Viceroy of Taxila?’ Sayana asked despairingly.

‘Well, I learned how to be a king.’

‘And is it difficult to be a king?’

‘Not for the one who is the oldest son of the Maharajah.’

‘Why then do the peoples have a king, my friend Sumana?’

Prince Sumana stared at Sayana in surprise.

‘The peoples do not have a king, wise Sayana. The king has people!’

‘But in the *Arthashastra* is written: ‘In the happiness of his subject lies the king’s happiness. Not what the king pleases is beneficial to him, beneficial to him is that what pleases his subjects.’

‘That is why my government takes care of the happiness of the subjects, holy Sayana.’

The wise Sayana kept silent.

‘And you think you are capable of being the Maharajah of the entire country, O, Raja?’

‘Certainly. Why not, wise Sayana? My empire will only grow and so will my income and my riches. I will appoint many Mahamatras to assist in governing it. My palace, I shall make into a heavenly place. Pataliputra will be the most beautiful city in the world. In the capital my soldiers will glitter in perfect gear. My elephants will be adorned with shining gold and glittering silver. Their caparisons will be the most richly adorned in the world so that every foreigner will know that I am the mightiest king that ever ruled.’

‘Ruled over what?’

‘Aryavarta!’

‘Who will govern Aryavarta?’

‘I, wise Sayana.’

‘Do you know the *Arthashastra*, the book of statecraft for the Raja?’

‘Vidu once taught me.’

‘Then you know that the Rajas who succumbed to lust, wrath, greed, pride, arrogance and overconfidence, and who could not curb their passions, perished, together with their kin and kingdom. Third *prakarana*.’

‘My ministers will take care that they comply with the *Arthashastra*, wise Sayana.’

‘According to the sixteenth *prakarana*, the king has to exert his powers: When the king exerts himself his subjects will follow him in diligence. Should he be negligent, then they will become negligent, too, and so destroy his work.’

‘But the ministers will take care of that. They are paid well for it. The Maharajah has to be a sacred being for his people, one whom they venerate; the gracious Maharajah whom they fear, the divine beauty on whom they can feast with their eyes; the inaccessible Highness, seated high above them on the ivory throne.’

‘Who has told you so?’

‘My ministers, holy Sayana.’

‘So, ... a golden puppet on an emerald throne.’ Prince Sumana gazed at the teacher with widened eyes. ‘But imagine such a Raja, one who succumbs to Kama, gambles away his riches, befogs his eyes with drinks ... all of it sensual enjoyments! So that his golden aura fades and his emerald

palace sinks into the impure bog of indolence and vanity. What then, high Raja?’

‘My ministers, wise Sayana.’

‘Which ministers?’

‘The Brahmin ministers!’

‘Brahmins like Devaka or Shakuni who malign an imperial Prince? Or Richika and Sunasepha, who wished to hand him over to murderers ... twice even!’

Sumana fell back in his seat, went pale and wept.

‘Then you tell me how, wise Sayana!’

‘But it is you who wants to be the Maharajah, not I. You have to rule in wisdom and goodness, not your ministers; they are only your council. You cannot turn the edifice of this world upside down, my Sumana. You demand beauty, riches, pomp. But these three outward appearances do not make you a king. He, is a king, who makes good laws and guards them from his ivory throne, that is the sacredness of the Maharajah. Pray to Indra and Brahma for energy and the zest to work or ask them to relieve you of the emperorship.’

‘That I do not wish, holy Sayana, and neither does the Brahmin-court!’

For both Sayana and Sumana, they were difficult days that week, endlessly tedious and trying.

The following week, the marriage was celebrated in all simplicity, and soon afterwards the young king and his queen left for the west.

Ashoka could no longer bear to be so far from Pataliputra, and to wait idly for information from his friends. He distrusted his father, the ministers, and the Brahmin-court. That was why he left for the last horse-post, before Pataliputra, not far from Bodh Gaya. From here, he would be able to discuss affairs with Sela, Satyavat, and Nata. If need be, he could act quickly. The Viceroy had been extremely careful with his choice of masters at the horse-posts. For the last one, he had taken Salya, the former stableman of Devi. Ashoka noticed immediately that Salya’s helper was a nosy, obtrusive fellow. His interest, especially in Ashoka’s informants, alerted the Viceroy to caution, and from that moment on he kept an eye on him. When a messenger of Sela came to inform that Sela, Satyavat and Rohini, would come to see him the next evening, Ashoka spied the

stableman, eavesdropping close by. He grasped him by his neck, looked silently at him and then snapped: 'My secrets are dangerous, fellow, I warn you.'

The next day he asked: 'How did you get that stableman, Salya?'

'He was my guest when the former stableman suddenly disappeared without a trace and he offered to be a helper, because I was in trouble. He is a Vaishya from Pataliputra on a pilgrimage, Sire.'

'Send him away, Salya!'

That night, when Ashoka together with Salya sat in the bright light of the full moon on the verandah of the house that lay hidden in the jungle at some distance from the road, three riders, two men and a woman, appeared from the direction of Gaya. Ashoka asked Salya to withdraw, and to take care that the surroundings would be safe for a meeting.

'The stableman?'

'I had him immediately sent away, Sire.'

'Well, Rohini, you here? How do you fare and how do you like life in the capital?'

'My sons are both healthy and we have few worries, Sire, as long as we don't create them ourselves.'

'Two sons! What riches, my Rohini! How many sacrifices had you to offer for that after the one I witnessed?'

Rohini laughed. 'None, Sire, except for some offerings of flowers, out of gratitude, to the glorious Buddha.'

'Take care that Narada does not hear how cheaply you got your sons! What brings you here?'

'Sire, only Rohini can report about Sumana's meeting with the Maharajah. She witnessed it herself.' Satyavat whispered.

Rohini kept silent for a moment; they listened. From some shrubs close to the house was heard the rustling of leaves – perhaps, a snake or a mongoose, looking for prey? Ashoka kept an eye on the place, never dropping his alertness.

'You, Rohini? Tell me.'

Rohini gave an accurate report of Sumana's visit to the Maharajah.

'And Satyavat?'

'Sire, I stayed in the hermitage of Sayana when Sumana was there. Rarely have I heard such peculiar conversation.'

Satyavat told the Prince in detail about what had happened in the hermitage.

‘Well, Satyavat, and where is Sumana now?’

‘On his way over to the west, Sire.’

‘And you, my friend Sela ... speak softly!’ Ashoka looked away from Sela towards the same place in the bushes. He could hear somebody carefully moving a foot. For one split moment a rough head showed up over the leaves ... to listen better to what Sela had to say? Before anyone noticed, a sharp chakra flew through the air ... a nasty rattling sound then a heavy fall. Ashoka signalled. A *kokila* trilled its song through the jungle; glow-worms whirled in the dark foliage. Night butterflies tumbled silently in the light of the silvery moon, and bats sailed, chasing through the night, while the jackals howled ominously in the far distance.

‘Sire! Danger! Will I ...?’

‘Stay quietly at your place, my Sela. I warned him not to break into my secrets. He did not believe it was dangerous. Does my Father still tolerate you in the army?’

‘My formal guard of honour is disbanded. Whether they still spy on me, I do not know. He there ...?’

‘No, he was Bhavila, from the Brahmin-court.’



6

SACRIFICES

The three messengers stayed overnight in the house and left early in the morning before the veil lifted from Ushas' golden gate. Ashoka returned to Vidisha, his mind at rest.

During his absence, Devi had become a mother for the third time, bearing a son, a weak child. After she was fully recovered, she and Ashoka made a trip to Sanchi to visit the place where their days of happiness had begun. The place on the hill was overgrown with shrubs. It was difficult to find the spot again.

'Here it is!' Ashoka called out. 'How can we remember from now on the place where I once regained my driving force which, as a ceaselessly burning offering fire, sustains with renewing sacred food, my confidence to do what I feel is needed and right. Your love, Kullika's friendship, Satyavat's gratefulness, and Revata's dedication: they are the four most beautiful gifts on the altar of Aryavarta, the sacrifice of the four varnas, my Devi. I want to build an offering shrine here, from which for all eternity the essence, the *sara* of these gifts will rise to strengthen the gods. They need it, my Devi. A dome as the firmament under which you brought your offering, my beloved Rani. At its horizon a procession path on which the pilgrims ascend like Surya, the right hand stretching towards the dome offering the gifts. A *vedika*¹ will fence off the sacred offering place from the outside

world so that offerings may succeed in peace. Four *Toranas*² will soar, lofty as the truth of the Atman, being so placed to give on all sides entry to all the varnas, thereby uniting India, offering liberation from hatred and selfishness, like Shiva creates life from death. Your love, my Devi, was the first and the most exalted sacrifice at this holy place.'

'United with yours, My Lord and My King. A *stupa* for the Chandra worship³ to Shiva and the Buddha ...'

'To the atman which is ever unfolding from the Atman, between the two infinities of time. Not a stupa crafted from the sacred deodar wood that will crumble—after three generations have passed into Yama's eternity—but one fashioned from stone which can withstand the ravages of time like the beautiful gifts of India.'

'Wonderful, my Raja. But the priests will not tolerate timber from the sacred deodar being replaced by stone.'

'They have to. Just like I shall rebuild their stone hearts into living flesh when you and I reside on the ivory throne of Pataliputra.'

Devi sighed and put her arms around the Raja who, deeply absorbed as he was in his tremendous tasks, had not given thought to her inner struggle.

'I cannot join you in that hell, my beloved King. Not because of our children and not because of myself. My love is great, maybe, greater than that of all the women who will live in the anthapura of the Emperor. But I will die under the scorching sun of Pataliputra and the hate of your enemies. Do not forget the quiet trees of Ujjain, my sorrow-free beloved one, and the sweetness of the flowers that surrounded us, celebrating our wedding in Sanchi, the hills of the Vindhya, the stupa of Sanchi, the moon of Malwa, perfecting our happiness with her soft glow. It is among them I want us to live, my king. In Pataliputra I would die without you. Let this be your refuge for restless thoughts when you fight your unavoidable fight. Do you need contemplation, strength, love ... then dwell in your mind on our lovely country of Avanti and we, your children, Kullika and myself will support you.'

'Kullika, my Purohita ...'

'Kullika loves your children more than you. And they need a good guide. You, no longer. You have Sela, Sagka, Khallataka and Sayana. Permit Kullika to stay here and be of support to me.'

Ashoka was deeply moved. Was the throne of Aryavarta worth this sacrifice? Sacrifice ... was he not himself, voluntarily, the sacrifice ... even willing!

‘I have to, my dear Devi!’

Devi understood.

They returned to the hermitage of Sudeva. He was charged with the building of the eternal Stupa of Sanchi. After they returned to Vidisha from the journey that had stirred their emotions so greatly, a second envoy from the Dakshina was awaiting Ashoka with a request for seed-grain. The Raja sent a messenger to Vasumitra to again load a hundred ox-carts with grain from the granaries of the king which were filled to the brim.

‘Sire, our land is parched. For two years the rain god has held back his heavenly milk. We are not able to pay you for such a wealth of grain.’

‘The grains belong to the Emperor and the Emperor belongs to the people of India. So, take it.’

‘Sire, we will sacrifice twelve of our loveliest girls to the rain-god. And we will also sacrifice twelve to the god of India.’

Asoka was shaken. He did not know that so close to the border of his kingdom, human sacrifice was so common. He wanted to know more. To sacrifice twenty-four girls?

‘How far is your capital from Vidisha?’

‘A journey of fourteen days, Sire.’

‘Then, we want to be there in seven.’ The envoy looked at the Viceroy in disbelief. Did he want to come with them to their far-away country?

When the small party was ready for departure and Ashoka was bidding farewell to Devi, she whispered: ‘From which god is my husband an incarnation?’

‘From Shiva, my *Parvati*.⁴’

‘Maybe, I am *Sita*⁵ with her children in the jungle.’

‘The people of *Ayodhya*⁶ demand their king, my Devi.’

After a journey of seven days Ashoka, with his entourage, entered the country of *Tuluva*⁷, situated on the opposite bank of the River Godavari. For the people of Dakshina the trek which was accomplished at the highest possible speed was like a tormenting dream while for Ashoka it was but an exercise. King Bustara received them with great honour. Fires were lit,

there was dancing and feasting to honour the exotic saviour of the people. Now it was time to sacrifice the girls to the rain-god. Since King Ashoka was present at the ceremony, the rain-god would surely be disposed more favourably. But the people, in their great excitement, saw in the benefactor the rain-god himself. The striking, gloriously dressed King approached the fire and requested the priest to take from each of the girls a single lock of hair and to offer that as a sacrifice to the fire. The rain-god refused anything more. Then he had the girls who were marked for the sacrifice, dressed in white muslin, had them adorned with glittering gems, and made them travel in a procession around Tuluva. A bard heralded the procession and announced on Ashoka's command:

‘Never again is it permitted to sacrifice a human being. The gods will favour those who save the lives of human creatures.’

Ashoka visited the surroundings of Tuluva. The parched, fissured farmlands, the scorched meadows, the thick clouds of dust above the roads and plains, the hollow-eyed natives, emaciated and weak ... they filled the Raja with great compassion. The little benefit he had brought them sunk into nothingness when compared to the immense good fortune they needed. The only thing that could aid their recovery was rain. That was what the dormant life of the Deccan was waiting for. Grishma soon would be over. Maybe, then! But his inextinguishable energy sought more effective means than the sacrifices of the Tuluvas ... When he returned to his country the waters of the Godavari rose because of rains in the Western Ghats. And the people of Dakshina soon identified their rain-god with the life-giving Shiva from the North. But Ashoka sent skilled masters in the use of water irrigation systems to the seared country on the other side of the Godavari to make irrigation canals, and to prevent further disasters.

Revata, for several years now, had scrupulously investigated how Ashoka's rules of governance were received by the people of Avanti. One evening he had himself announced to the Viceroy.

‘Well, Revata, what is the news that you bring to me?’

‘Sire, I search and find nothing. I want to serve my Lord and here in Malwa all wish to do the same. What then is the importance of my work here?’

‘What about my safety, my Revata?’

‘All of the people watch over your safety, O, Raja. Everyone feels happy under your care which offers security and justice to all. Nobody finds it necessary to break the rules of the King. What then is there for a spy to do?’

‘What is it my noble friend Revata wants?’

‘Sire, I wish to go some place where I can be of use to you. To Taxila, to Pataliputra, to Iran, but with such dedicated people as are here in Avanti there is no work for Revata. Tell me, Sire, where I can make good use of my wasted life.’

Ashoka smiled. ‘You are right, Revata. Work is like the sacred banyan tree: It becomes more magnificent and more revered the more its air-roots are driven into fertile soil. But in Pataliputra, everyone knows you too well, my good friend.’

‘Sire, there is only one who really knows me. I have learned to hide myself in any *varna*, in any age of a man, amongst any people, because I have learned so many of the languages of India. I can make myself a native of any place. I know enough of all branches of science not to betray myself in a discussion. I have absorbed much of all that the sky whispers to us at night. I have learned how to defend myself against man and beast; I know more of the art of healing than anyone, for I was a guest in a thousand homes where I could apply what I learned in Taxila. Until now I investigated for you what could be either dangerous or useful to you. In Malwa there is no more work for me. And what happens farther away could harm you.’

‘Then go to Pataliputra. Protect my father against the wiles of the Brahmin-court and its followers. And your great manas will watch over all that is of importance to me. Yet, do allow yourself a visit to my youngest son tomorrow and tell me what you think of his health.’

‘Sire, I am a Shudra.’

Ashoka walked up to him and embraced him. ‘A Shudra, my Revata? You are a human being and that is the highest form in which the Atman, when it creates life, can unfold itself. Vasudeva, Vasumitra, Chandragupta, Vimalamitra – all are Shudras if they refuse to be subdued by the rod of the priesthood. He who knows the sacrificial priests in their hearts should be happy to be a Shudra.’

‘Sire, tomorrow I will pay my respects to the Rani and if she allows me to see her, the youngest Prince.

The next morning, a rich caravan from Taxila arrived in Ujjain. One of the most renowned Vaidyas⁸ from the city had joined the group. In Taxila they had heard that the youngest son of the Raja was very weak, and so they had decided to send one of their most famous scholars to the capital of their beloved army chief.

Revata then sent a message that he thought it was not necessary for him to come any more so he would depart this morning for Pataliputra. Ashoka received the Vaidya warmly. He vaguely recognised him from his days in Taxila. The famous scholar spoke at length about events in the west with the Viceroy, and finally asked that the young Prince be shown to him. He carefully examined him and his conclusion was: weak but without specific ailments. His advice: just mother’s milk as long as possible. The same way that a mother elephant keeps a weak calf longer with her and nurses it naturally, so too a mother has to take care of her weak baby for a longer time and give it the best of all that Brihaspati gave to a woman.

The Raja himself led the physician back to the audience hall.

‘Well, Sire, in the afternoon I will leave for Pataliputra to guard the Maharajah and to look after your interests.’

In complete surprise, Ashoka looked at Revata in his disguise.

‘Now I do not doubt anymore, my dear friend Revata, and I wish you a successful journey. Use my horse-posts and make use of my intercession and my ring, here, see. Do know that it is a great sacrifice for me to give you up?’

Ashoka offered him the most precious ring he possessed. With a deep bow to his beloved Raja, Revata kissed the ring. The parting affected both.



AN ADEPT IN RUDRA'S DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

Revata travelled the long Ashoka Road on horseback; from Bodh Gaya, he continued his journey on foot. He was clothed like a respectable pilgrim, like a Brahmin priest on his way to the capital of the great empire, after a long journey. His robe was threadbare but from his weather-beaten face, his steady pace, relaxed but clear look, upright bearing, one could surmise the wise pilgrim.

As he was approaching Pataliputra, he met two Brahmins. After a respectful greeting the elder of the two asked: 'From whence are you coming, revered pilgrim, and to where does your path lead you?'

'From heaven ... towards hell.'

'You talk in riddles, Sir.'

'Less than you think. Right now I come from the holy mountain of the Vindhyas, the *Amarakantaka*¹; before that I had walked through the valley along the sacred Narmada. I visited the holy city of Ujjain and have spent a long time in the sacred city of Taxila, where I acquired *Rudra's*² divine knowledge. There I had arrived from the hallowed places where the Kauravas and Pandavas of the holy *Mahabharata* fought their divine battle.

My path has led me there from the blessed lakes of Kailasa. Before that, I came from Kashmir. And my guru in Kosala had received me from the holy city of Kashi, where my father had brought me from his sanctified hermitage deep in the jungle. Are not all of these holy places like heaven in Bharatavarta³? And now I am going to Pataliputra.'

'And you call that hell, revered pilgrim?'

'Did not King Ajatashatru, who committed patricide, choose that place as the capital of Magadha instead of Rajagriha? And was he not killed by his son Udayibhada? And he by his son Annirudbhada? And he by his son Munda? Such deeds only take place in hell. I studied in Taxila the healing arts that cure the sick and it is said that the god of the healing arts, Rudra, is jealous of my skills. It may be true since I hate death more than he ... and he who causes death!'

Revata continued with his tale. 'Once, a tiger came on my way and I knew what he wanted from me: that I should cure his mate; she was ill, maybe, from want of food. I walked up to him and I cried to him with a terrible yell: 'I do not help murderers!' I looked into his wild eyes. The coward ran away from my indignant look. Later on, in the jungle north of Ayodhya, I came across a herd of elephants. The leader of the dear animals was looking around in despair with his small eyes, because he, with his great power and jungle wisdom, was not able to make his desperate herd that was milling helplessly around trust him. Nervously and without success the poor helpless king flapped with his ears, tail and trunk at the insects, mosquitoes and flying ants lodged in the folds of his thick hide. Even the monkeys mocked him, the mighty one. He had hurt his foot by stepping on a thick thorn and could not go on. For half a day was I occupied in curing the poor animal, taking out with utmost care the thorn from the badly infected wound, covering it with curative forest-herbs and cooling lotus leaves from a nearby pond, and then wrapping it around with my own loin cloth. For four days I took care of him. Then he was able to go on. The whole herd led me back through the jungle for days, resting where I rested, going where I went, until I reached the road to Ayodhya. Then I believe they thought I was safe. If they had known I was now on my way to Pataliputra, I am sure they would have come to protect me. Elephants are grateful and faithful; a tribe of Rajputans that was already reduced by half I rescued from the plague. Everywhere on my path I release wretched people who would otherwise be tormented to death by demons. A holy voice inside

told me: 'Go to the hell, to Pataliputra.' My inner voice never deceives me. She it was who guided me from one holy place in India to another.'

'Are you then not afraid of losing your own life?'

'I have saved thousands. Would I then be afraid for the one of Ratnaka?'

'Well, pious Ratnaka, then join Munda and Sudjata, and enjoy the hospitality of the Brahmin-court. Everyone will be happy to accord a reception to a man of the highest varna who has visited all the holy places of India and who is so adept in the divine knowledge of Rudra. Maybe, you will learn by experience that the city of the sacred Maharajah is one of the heavenly abodes as well.'

Ratnaka was received with respect by Chandaka after Munda and Sudjata had told him who the pilgrim was. In the council held that night, the priests announced that they were fortunate to take care of the holy Ratnaka as their guest. Perhaps, he wanted to be welcomed into the large group of pious men, who were cared for by the Maharajah for the sake of his welfare and that of the country. Chandaka proposed, and the court agreed, that it would be wise to have such an able great teacher, Acharya of the healing arts available in case the Maharajah was beset by illness again. The magician of the Emperor was not liked by the priests. The physicians of the University of Taxila were far more skilled, and not only in healing arts, for they could give potions to ailing people which made them numb and could wield power over their patients. But the physician should be convinced about Sumana's lawful right to the ivory throne and must hate whoever opposed this right. The other members of the Council nodded. Moreover, the Maharajah would trust a physician coming from afar more than one who was a part of the court. Mishaps that could take place during the treatment would be the responsibility of the scholar from Taxila; that, too, was better. Again the Council nodded. 'Ratnaka is supposed to be a clever physician and we will spread his fame and elevate his name as high as Chandra himself.' The Council again nodded in agreement.

Ratnaka did cure the ills at the Brahmin-court and it was not long before the people of Pataliputra began to speak about his curative miracles. Before long, he was called the Holy Miracle of Taxila.

He had now lived for some months at the court and had keenly observed his surroundings. He was abreast of the ambitions of the priests which he perceived almost better than they themselves, since they were more or less unaware of their own thoughts, whereas he analysed them sharply. Then he

was called in to see the Brahmin Varisara who complained of pain in his head and a sudden stiffening of his muscles. Every sound was agonising to him, each touch like torture. Ratnaka asked to be left alone with the hapless patient.

‘Ratnaka, were you not in Nepal?’

‘Yes, certainly, Varisara.’

‘Do you speak the language of that country?’

‘Surely.’

‘Speak softly. There are only very few priests here who do understand it. Close the door as people are listening. So, do you know, Ratnaka, people here need you in the event that the Maharajah falls ill?’

‘No, Varisara. But if he was ailing, I would cure him.’

‘You know that a Maharajah will never break his word. If he but once says that Prince Sumana will become his successor, then his decision becomes irrevocable.’

‘What the Maharajah does is well done, Varisara.’

‘But ...’ Varisara, to Revata’s surprise, suddenly rose from his couch. ‘But if the Brahmins were to medicate him—and the Maharajah does not anymore know what he does—then they can force him to utter things which he himself would rather not have said.’

The priest got up and restlessly paced his cell. Cautiously, he bent towards Ratnaka.

‘I am not ill, Ratnaka. I have faked my illness because I wanted to talk to you in private. Not one of them trusts me and it would look very suspicious if we meet. I am sure one of them is listening there at the door. I have warned them often, you see, that Sumana should not be the Crown Prince as that would be disastrous for India.’

‘And if the Maharajah wishes so?’

‘The Brahmin-court wishes it. All the priests who are here—allegedly for his welfare—eat the bread of the Maharajah, live in his houses, receive boon after boon and have only one wish: that the insignificant Sumana becomes the Crown Prince. When he becomes Maharajah their way of life is secured and we will be the masters in the kingdom. But I assure you, Ratnaka, you, who have roamed around the whole of India, it would be truly disastrous for the kingdom if they were to be the masters. Taxila would be struck down, and Ujjain and Taxila’s trade with foreigners

forbidden, the sacrificial ceremonies increased and taxes raised. Revolt and war would threaten our holy country. Is that what you wish, Ratnaka?’

‘Not I, Varisara. But whom do you want to be Crown Prince? Sumana is the elder son of the Maharajah, is he not?’

‘Listen, speak softly, the cedar walls of the court are hard but they allow voices to be carried through easily. Speak softly, very softly! All those far-off peoples and the wise Sayana and Khallataka ... they want the Viceroy of Ujjain.’

‘And do you think that his succession can take place without revolt or war?’

‘Maybe not, but he is a great man. He shall bring happiness and prosperity to India and bring the priests down to their knees. That is why they hate him. They want the power in India, that is their meat and drink. And you will be used to manipulate the Maharajah. I warn you, Ratnaka, I warn you!’

‘Why are you not warning the Maharajah himself? What can I, a simple physician, do?’

‘He will not believe me and the priests will have me killed. They already say that they think I am mad because I oppose their plans.’

‘But who can assure me that you are not a deceiver who wants to test me to see if I will be a loyal instrument for the court?’ Revata risked saying, while he tried to read the impact of his words on Varisara’s face.

‘I will give you proof!’ whispered Varisara frantically. ‘I will take care that tomorrow you will be called in by Satyavat, the overseer of the parks! He is a great friend of ... listen ... Ashoka.’

‘But who told you that I am not a loyal friend of the Brahmins?’

‘Sayana and Khallataka are Brahmins, too! But I listened in to many of your discussions with Chandaka. Who gloats at the remains of the prey the lion leaves behind cries differently. If I need you I shall become rigid again!’

Then Varisara walked out of the place, calling out: ‘Blessed be Indra, Blessed be Rudra, Blessed be Surya! Ratnaka has cured me just like that. I can walk again and my pain has left me. Blessed, blessed, blessed!’

The next morning Satyavat asked for Ratnaka, because he was ill.

‘Well,’ Ratnaka whispered, ‘does Satyavat recognise me?’

Satyavat looked at him blankly for quite some time, until Ratnaka removed his disguise.

‘Revata! ...’

The Council of the court decided to find out how well Ratnaka’s opiates worked. Once when Varisara secretly listened to discussions in the Council he was caught. They wanted to lead him to Chandaka, but Varisara pretended that he had been at that place because he had suddenly developed rigidity again; he had unbearable pain and could not walk. He was carried into the Council Hall, moaning and groaning; the poor patient could not bear the slightest touch. The Council had been waiting for a situation like this to trap Varisara. Ratnaka was called in. He requested that the patient should be brought to his cell. Chandaka, however, ordered that Varisara should stay in the hall.

‘Well, revered Ratnaka, show us how well you are able to give him the opiates of Taxila that will make him forget his pain.’

Ratnaka showed great concern.

‘Yes, venerable priest Chandaka ... But first I have to examine carefully his heartbeat. If his heart is not working properly, Varisara could die.’

‘Then examine him!’ Chandaka answered tersely, annoyed by Ratnaka’s resistance. Ratnaka examined him long and earnestly and then stated that otherwise Varisara was healthy. The physician picked up the drug and gave them to the patient. Soon, the pain stopped. He did not move anymore. A complete relaxation seemed to set in. Then Ratnaka had to leave the room.

‘Listen, Varisara,’ Chandaka called out to him. ‘You do not wish Sumana to become Crown Prince?’

‘No,’ Varisara said, shaking slowly his head.

‘But he is the oldest son!’

‘... Does not ... matter ...’

The Council pressed on, not giving him a minute of respite. They asked him one question after another. Varisara was unwavering or kept silent. At last, after being harangued for a long time, he was overcome by a mental tiredness which broke his resistance. The interrogation by the priests became more and more oppressive; at last he could no longer resist and said just what they wanted to hear.

‘So, you agree that the succession should take place according to law.’

‘Yes ...’

‘Prince Sumana has to be the Crown Prince.’ Varisara remained silent, exhausted. ‘You will never oppose this?’

‘... No ...’

‘You heard it, priests: Varisara thinks that Prince Sumana has to be the successor to the Maharajah. Is that right, Varisara?’

‘... Ah ... Yes ...’ Then the members of the Council left the hall and Ratnaka was allowed in, to take further care of the poor tormented Varisara.

The patient was brought to consciousness again by Ratnaka who watched over him by his couch. He saw how Varisara was struggling with his thoughts. At last, the Brahmin jumped up, grabbing furiously at his hair.

‘Ratnaka, Ratnaka! Let me go ... let me ... I want to see the Maharajah ... immediately ... Nothing will keep me away ... from unmasking the criminals.’

‘Stay calm, Varisara, you will spoil everything!’

‘I will spoil nothing ... do you know that ...’

‘Quiet, you stupid ...!’ Ratnaka hissed. He could, however, not halt the excited priest. Varisara rushed away. Outside the door he was grabbed by a few people who had been listening and imprisoned in his cell. In the evening, first he, and later Ratnaka were brought before the priests’ Council and sharply interrogated.

‘What was it Varisara wanted to unmask?’

‘What was it that Varisara would spoil?’

The physician and patient did not betray each other. Ratnaka knew how to give the Council acceptable explanations. Besides, they needed him. But now the priests, more than ever, feared Varisara. He was condemned to a pilgrimage to *Khasi Manipura* in remotest India. He knew what that meant: exposure to the dangers of the jungle, where the tigers reign. The next morning, an ox-cart took him away. For days on end a few priests went along with him, as far as the road was safe. After that they left him to his fate, forced him onto the pilgrims’ path, and wished him a happy return.



8

I, REFUSE

Months followed each other. Satyavat once again resumed his perilous work of spying on the court now that Varisara had left. At times, with utmost prudence and discretion, he broke into the very dwellings of the priests. He always cast himself in the role of their devoted ally, provided them with the most delicious fruits and flowers, tended their gardens with dedicated care. Nothing suspicious was taking place. Everyone waited with never-ending patience like the wild cat awaits its prey. *Jyeshtha*¹ traversed, and slowly the rains brought relief from the sluggishness of the heat. When *Sharadh* sent the people its autumnal illnesses from the mist of the jungle and the marshy fields, the priests had made up their plans long since in the restful months that the monsoon brings in its wake. *Hemanth* brought after this interval a new and refreshing energy to all that was alive, and trees and plants stored up their juices. Ratnaka, being the most renowned *acharya* of the healing arts, was called in a few times to see the Maharajah. Even a passing insignificant ailment sharpened the alertness of the priests. With Ratnaka's help their offerings and prayers put to flight the somewhat illusionary threat. Chandaka treated the supposed Brahmin with respect and while the rains swept through the plains of the Ganga, he had long talks with the physician about the dangers that were threatening the highest varna, the fears of the entire community of priests about the wild Viceroy,

and their hopes in the lawful Crown Prince. Ratnaka took care never to let his disguise slip. He knew he did not enjoy their fullest confidence and also why it was that many of the priests repeatedly accosted and questioned him with mistrust in their hearts. But with complete and ever-conscious submission, he played his role as a man of science. And Chandaka, on his part, employed a long yet unobtrusive strategy to leave the physician in no doubt of what was expected of him. Like the Areka—rising slowly, invisibly, yet surely from the earth and barely noticeably develops shoot after shoot into a stately palm tree—so, too, was Chandaka's insidious plan developing. Such plan was, step-by-step, to convince Ratnaka of a higher necessity, to lead him to his way of thinking, and thus to the conviction of his holy destination, which was as inevitable as a 'law of heaven and earth', to which even the mightiest had to bow.

'When Rudra deems it necessary to utilise certain herbs for curing serious ailments and Brahma decrees the use of different ones, then whose will should prevail, Ratnaka?'

'Rudra's, because he is the god of the medicinal herbs.'

'But overall creation exists Brahma who looks down from above and rules over all. In his will, the will of all that lives is contained.'

'But the intrinsic nature of Rudra is to relieve by his own intuition, be faithful to his own divinity, and inevitably watch over his own karma.'

'Your sharp manas, I praise, Ratnaka. But if sicknesses afflict the earthly creatures it is an infliction by Brahma, and Rudra does not have the divine powers to revoke the penalty imposed by Brahma. It is out of Brahma that Rudra was created. And Rudra's will is part of Brahma's eternal will.'

'But the world of the gods would cease to be if Brahma, the eternal deity, who also determines their intrinsic nature, should bring that nature in variance with itself.'

'For that, Brahma can in time change their nature ... destroy that god of yours, Ratnaka, and create a new god, Ratnaka. The Will of Brahma is all-mighty and spares neither the subject nor the Maharajah, not even the gods.'

'And the Brahmins?'

'You are of our varna, Ratnaka. You know the revealed Vedas place the gods in awe of the Brahmins, the prayers and the sacrifices and the prayers

and the sacrifices are under the thrall of the Brahmins. Would you wish to change all this, Brahmin?’

‘No.’

‘Well then, Ratnaka, I am the head of the Brahmin-court. So, the will of the gods, of Brahma, is in my hands.’

Ratnaka listened to this blasphemous harangue with an impassive face. He did not want to be thrown to the tigers, like Varisara, because he wished to serve his master. But at night when he lay down on his simple cot he was keenly aware of the circumstance in which he found himself. To flee would mean handing over the Maharajah to the ‘wise’ physicians of the court. To heal the Maharajah in any way would arouse Chandaka to seek revenge. To give the Maharajah the soporific opiate would be equal to serving Sumana. If their plotting succeeds—that is to force the Maharajah to echo their choice—then he, Ratnaka, would become the feared witness against the priests and his life would be like a fragile flower in the storm. If it failed to succeed then he would still remain to them a dangerous opponent, more threatening than Varisara, to whom even more vicious ploys of the Brahmins would be found fitting. To inform the Maharajah of the situation would equal suicide. Bindusara, as he had learned from Ashoka, would never ever enter into a struggle with the Brahmin-court on behalf of a Shudra. He would rather hand over the Shudra to the wrath of the gods. What was the way out?

The next morning, he gave a sign to Satyavat, and soon there came a message asking whether Ratnaka could come to see Rohini; she had suddenly become severely ill.

Ratnaka informed Satyavat about everything that Ashoka had to know. A few hours later a horseman galloped along the Ashoka-road towards Ujjain. By then, Ashoka had left for the west to the land of the Bhils and the Rajputans, and no one knew when he would return. Kullika considered the information to be very crucial ...

At last *Vasant*, spring, arrived. Aryavarta readied itself for it with thousands of offerings and the priests welcomed it with soma and animal sacrifices. The mantras of the hotars resounded through the silent nights of the full moon and the holy samans of the udgatars entered the hearts of the Vaishyas, which swollen by the wealth of spring were ready to burst open. The news that the Maharajah had taken ill came as a release to the Brahmin-court. Ratnaka, Chandaka and Khallataka were also summoned by

the Maharajah to the palace and were admitted into the sleeping chambers of Bindusara. His magician had kindled the fires and was murmuring spells from the *Atharva Veda*. A few female guards stood near the head of the bed, armed and motionless. The Emperor lay on his couch, his features suffused and twisted in pain.

Ratnaka began his investigations painstakingly. He found the pulse rapid and irregular and diagnosed an illness of the liver and a strong variant action of the heart. He then requested the Maharajah to have the holy fires moved to a different room, recommended cooling of the body, some medication to lower the fever, and further, rest. Khallataka was entrusted by the Maharajah with the affairs of the government.

Chandaka wanted to know what the real condition of the Maharajah was.

‘Sir, I have to visit a seriously ill person. Wait for me in the court.’

He rushed to Satyavat’s house.’

‘Satyavat,’ he whispered, ‘let Sela instantly send a message to Ujjain or you speed there yourself. The Maharajah is seriously ill. And I do not know whether I can keep the priests away from his bedside. There is only one who is capable of doing so!’

Satyavat warned Nata, and Nata left immediately to see Sela who despatched the urgent message to Ujjain.

The head of the Brahmin-court waited impatiently for Ratnaka although not a muscle in his face revealed a sign of the long-awaited gusts which the storm of cravings sent ahead.

‘Well, my learned Ratnaka, what is your opinion?’

‘The Maharajah is ill, though there is no immediate danger, venerable Chandaka.’

‘Is he in pain?’

‘Yes, but bearable.’

‘You know that until now the Maharajah has not yet indicated his successor.’

‘That is the concern of the palace; I am only the physician of the Maharajah.’

‘It may be you have to prescribe a narcotic!’ Chandaka’s dark eyes looked up at Ratnaka inquiringly without a trace of excitement but so

compelling, that Ratnaka understood: refusal, hesitation, negating, yielding, all would be as dangerous for the Raja of Ujjain as for himself.

‘What you demand, O, Chandaka, is as yet impossible. The condition of the heart does not permit it. To give opiates when there is such an irregular heart beat is very dangerous.’

‘So, you refuse.’

‘My conscience and my oath of loyalty to the appropriate application of medicines, forbid prescribing this drug to the Maharajah.’

‘But if the gods demand it!’

‘My karma will not bear the murder of a king.’

‘And if the priests absolve you from all sins?’

‘My rebirth will be determined by my deeds.’

‘I have no trust in your assertions, Ratnaka!’ the priest’s scream was intimidating.

‘That is up to you, venerable Chandaka. My position prohibits me to do it.’

‘The same treatment did not harm Varisara! Maybe it is you, who do not wish to do it!’

‘You know I did not oppose it in Varisara’s case. After my examination of the holy Maharajah, I cannot take the risk.’

‘But for how long?’

‘Till the beat of his heart becomes regular again.’

‘Then the pain may have left.’

‘As a physician I should wish so.’

‘And, as a Brahmin?’

‘Also as a Brahmin.’

‘The *Vajasaneyi-Samhita* says: ‘The Brahmin who knows, in his power the gods are.’ Again he challenged Ratnaka: ‘So, you refuse?’

‘For now, yes. You have to wait for an opportune moment.’

‘The fortune of our varna is in your hands, Ratnaka, and so is that of India.’

‘Also, the life of the sacred Maharajah and that requires my priority.’

Ratnaka was called again to the sickbed of the Maharajah.

‘Relieve my pain, Ratnaka.’

Ratnaka gave the Maharajah a mildly affecting sedative.

The Maharajah's speech was slow: 'What ... do I have to do ... wise Ratnaka?'

'Have a fortnightly offering ceremony performed by the most competent priests led by Chandaka. Order them to fully engage themselves with only that and demand the tanunaptram, O, Maharajah. Then wait and see how the gods will be disposed towards you through my knowledge of medications.'

The Maharajah had Chandaka called in immediately.

'Revered Chandaka, a fortnightly sacrifice to all the important gods ... Take the most qualified priests as hotars, udgatars and advaryus. You are the principal priest. I demand the utmost dedication of the *ritvei*².'

Chandaka bowed low and deep before the ailing Emperor.

'Now swear the tanunaptram, revered Chandaka.'

For a moment the priest staggered, then without hesitation swore the oath that he, whatever may happen, would look after the interest of the Yajaman³ fairly, while invoking the Agni Tanunapat.

The Maharajah made a sign with his hand that the meeting was over.

'Who advised the Maharajah to make the sacrifice, Ratnaka?'

'Sir, he who is severely ill feels himself closer to the gods.'

'Not you, Ratnaka?'

'I? Venerable first priest, my only sacrifice should be to serve Rudra. With that I compound my karma. In your works, I do not interfere ...'

Chandaka looked straight into his eyes. For Ratnaka it was not difficult to meet his stare.

'Who do you wish should be the successor of Bindusara?'

'He, whom the sacred Maharajah chooses.'

The sacrifice was performed meticulously. Many priests participated in it. The people of Pataliputra, upset over the illness of the Maharajah, and the people of the cities and villages who had heard the calamitous news and feared even greater calamities, had built sacrificial altars and let the Brahmins make offerings. It was a happy period for the sacrificial priests.

Ratnaka waited, anxiously wondering whether Ashoka would come in time. The fortnightly sacrifice neared its completion but the condition of the Maharajah did not improve. Ratnaka knew that Chandaka would soon request him, even force him, to do certain deeds he did not wish to commit.

‘Will I be cured, Ratnaka?’

‘It may be that the gods will be so pleased with your sacrifice, holy Maharajah, that they safeguard you for India.’

‘Can you save me, Ratnaka?’

‘I hope to do so, highly revered Maharajah. Your life means more to me than my own.’

‘Who will ... help me ... in my fear ...?’

‘Sayana is a wise and holy Brahmin, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Sayana! Yes, Sayana. Let him come.’

Sayana appeared the same day.

‘My good friend Sayana ... I cannot find rest. I do not ... have not yet ... appointed a successor. Who is it the gods wish, my Sayana? How will I be received by Yama ... if I have forsaken my duty. Who?’

‘Gracious Lord, you always accomplished your sacred duty to the delight of the gods. Why should Yama not receive you in a friendly way? Your clear conscience and conscientious sense of duty prevented you from making a choice. Were you now to choose Ashoka then Sumana will start a civil war; were you to choose Sumana then Ashoka will do the same. If you choose neither of them, then the same thing will happen. In all three cases, the gods will choose for you. So, why torment yourself, my revered Lord! You always placed highly the three endeavours of the human being, equally: *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*— justice, public welfare, and love. Kautilya claims that the public welfare has priority, for it is in this, that just law as much as love, is rooted. If an excess of importance is accorded to the law, then it harms itself, as well as the other two.’

Bindusara understood and nodded, and kept silent.

‘You had already chased away the six enemies of the *Atharva Veda*. Many kings who surrendered to them, met with ruin for their kingdom and kin ... lechery ...’ Bindusara lifted his hand and Sayana kept silent.

‘Will the fortnightly sacrifice ... save me?’

‘The faithful performance of your duty was your sacrifice, Gracious Majesty. That is the only sacrifice that is of value. It has already released you and made your people happy.’

‘Do you mean it is no longer a need that I stay ... in life?’

‘I will thank the gods if they will preserve you for the empire, mighty and sacred Maharajah. But who can resist when the time has come?’

Whether you enter Yama's realm now or after some more years, your many work will remain forever. The next Maharajah will build on them. It is your work that he continues, for good or bad. May it be for the good.'

'But what if India is torn asunder? I wish to have control myself.'

'The next reign will be determined by your work, not by your will.'

'My choice is my work, too.'

Sayana thought: This was the moment he had to speak out!

'Well, gracious Maharajah: if you choose Ashoka then you break with tradition but the lineage of Chandragupta and Bindusara will rule India. If you choose Sumana then you break off with the spirit of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the sacrificial priests will dominate your empire.'

'Since his marriage he is taking better care of government affairs.'

'So, even worse, his wife, the daughter of a minister, rules.'

The Maharajah faced a dilemma ...

'I thank you, my wise Sayana. I hope to see you again soon.'

The next day, the sacrifice was completed and Chandaka wished to inform the Emperor himself, in the presence of the ministers, Arada and Udra.

'Did the gods accept your offerings, my Chandaka?'

'Sire, I doubt if they did. Now I see you did not regain your health. The fires did not roar the way I would have liked, the flames did not rise straight and high towards the sky to convey your precious gifts to the gods. Could it be that Agni was unwilling, Sire? Although the hotars recited the *Rig Veda* without any errors, I lacked the holy conviction that they were able to convince the gods to take part in the sacrifice. There must have been an obstacle for the gods. Tell me, your Brahman, your principal priest, and I will get ready a new offering, gracious Maharajah.'

The Emperor still found it difficult to speak. 'I do not deem that to be necessary ... my Chandaka.'

'My Lord, do not test the gods. You may have to appear before them soon, then you should not appear to have failed in your duties, Sire.'

'What is ... the obstacle, Chandaka?'

'Sire, you did not choose a successor and so not the right successor. Aryavarta expects you to appoint its new Maharajah before Yama summons you to follow him.'

'And who ... is the right successor?'

‘Well, the Crown Prince, your elder son, O, Maharajah. Just say that one word, mighty Lord of all noble Aryans and the gods will be on your side and accept with favour your offerings and return to you your health and to the Aryans their next lawful Lord. Your butter, ghee, and milk will feed them, the meat of the offered animals will strengthen their powers, your soma, will lift up their good spirits, all for the welfare of the Maharajah and his people.’

‘Wait for my ... decision, my Chandaka.’

‘Will not there be some risk that the gracious Maharajah will be too late for the gods? Does he not consider the succession by the oldest son of the father a duty of the mightiest ruler of all the Aryans, a holy assignment?’

‘If that was so ... a choice is useless.’

‘But it would have your sacred affirmation.’

‘It will have that ... even if I choose another one.’

‘My Lord, the priests of Madhyadesa fear your choice and its disastrous consequences.’

‘The gods have placed the choice in my hands ... So, wait.’

He waved his hand, fatigued.

When Chandaka’s pressure tactics had failed, he straightaway went to see Ratnaka.

‘Ratnaka ... I can no longer tolerate any delay. You put at risk our varna with your indecisiveness. Tomorrow, in a sacred session, the High Council of all priests will absolve you from all responsibility. The Maharajah resists my most urgent warning. Only you can save the varna from the devastation that looms. I demand that you fulfil your duty as a Brahmin.’

‘My duty towards the Maharajah?’

‘Your duty towards our varna, the Aryans, the holy Aryavarta and the gods, towards Brahma!’

‘Sire, wait for a few more days, the heart of the Maharajah is recovering slowly. I will soon let you know when it can happen without danger.’

‘Within three days, at full moon, Chandra’s soma-jug will be filled in the first *kala* of the night. After that I will not tolerate even one second of delay. Bear in mind that nothing will prevent me from executing the will of the gods, Ratnaka.’

Ratnaka knew what this meant. If Ashoka did not arrive in time, his only way out was flight. Or, death. He warned Sela. Satyavat was sent to

Ujjain in great haste to urge the Viceroy to come with utmost speed. Short of a dangerous conflict, Ratnaka would no longer be able to prevent the solemn ceremony of the absolution of guilt and would be reminded of his duty with unrelenting pressure.

Two days went by. The third one began as a radiant morning. Towards the afternoon, a heavy thunderstorm suddenly broke out, and soon passed. But the roads! Ratnaka felt desperate. Flee to Ashoka? Impossible! Tell the Maharajah all! It could cause a setback on his sickness in a very opposing way. Warn Khallataka and Sayana, telling them what Chandaka was demanding of him? Then he would have to acknowledge to both Brahmins who he was: a Shudra. Have both present before the Maharajah when Chandaka wanted to play his dangerous game? What if Ashoka did not come in time ...?

Evening fell. Chandra poured out her silvery light over the white towers of the palace, over the silent clusters of trees in the gardens and the sleepy lotus ponds. The kokilas spring night's songs filled the parks with the richness of Vesanthe, the blossoms dispersed their perfumes. Ratnaka, in despair, cautioned Khallataka and Sayana. Earlier, Chandaka, Udra, and Arada departed for the quarters of the Maharajah.

The chief priest suggested to the Maharajah that a new great sacrificial offering be performed to Rudra; the patient hardly responded.

'Are the fires aflame ... O, magician?'

'Yes, Sire.'

'Sire, your oldest son ...' whispered Chandaka, only to be dismissed by the Maharajah with a sign of his hand.

'Sire, do you dare to appear before the gods like this?' Again the Emperor lifted his hand, dropped it, fatigued.

'Gracious Maharajah, let Ratnaka give you a mild calming potion. You will have rest and wake up refreshed tomorrow.' The Maharajah did not answer.

'Let us go, Ratnaka, we will get it from the pharmacy.'

Chandaka knew where the drug was kept and joined the physician. When they returned, Khallataka and Sayana had arrived. Chandaka was shaken; then he walked up to greet Sayana, who like many Brahmins was an adept in the healing arts as well. Ratnaka understood there was no way to back out. Chandaka had been the instigator but all blame would be placed

before him. And nobody knew as yet that he was a Shudra! There was only one way out and the outcome for the Maharajah would be less injurious than the drug!

‘Ratnaka wants to give the Maharajah a mildly working sleeping potion. Nothing is better for the patient than rest,’ Chandaka murmured softly.

Ratnaka examined the patient once more, slowly, to gain time. The heart was functioning very weakly. Then, with great dignity, he turned calmly towards the attendants:

‘Holy Sayana and high ministers, the reverent Chandaka wishes that I administer a soporific, so that the Maharajah, in a state of half-consciousness, will appoint Prince Sumana as the successor to the throne. I refuse. The heart of the patient will not withstand it. It could lead to death.’

The ministers and Sayana were aghast, and rose at the same time from their seats. The Maharajah, startled, raised himself up half-way and looked dazedly at Ratnaka. His features showed great fear; his strength failed to support him and he fell back onto the cushions.

He managed to address Chandaka: ‘Speak!’

Chandaka turned ashen but recovered immediately.

‘Mighty and Holy Maharajah, I ordered him to give you a very mild sleeping draught, as you have heard. He has taken that out of the pharmacy in my presence. What he has hidden under his gown, I do not know. He thinks perhaps to be able to prevent in some way, You, wise Maharajah, from appointing Sumana as the Crown Prince and successor to the throne! I have nothing to do with that. Let him be searched. Probably he acts on the orders of someone else who desires the ivory throne.’

To the utter surprise of Ratnaka, they did find another drug hidden under his clothes. ‘Holy Maharajah ... I did not know this. Three days ago Chandaka and the council of the Brahmin-court forced upon me absolution of all my guilt so that I would take the risk of giving you the dangerous narcotic.’

‘All the members of the council of the Brahmin-court will immediately testify that this pilgrim, who asked for our hospitality, is lying. He speaks falsehood! He does not dare to apply the poison because the holy Sayana is present here. Let him be tortured, mighty Maharajah and he will confess his evil plans. Then will you get to know too, who sent him.’

For one moment Revata considered taking off his disguise in front of Sayana. Sayana knew him from the hermitage, and would understand that Revata was here to protect the Maharajah. But then he would have to make a reference to Ashoka and he knew, by doing so, that he would arouse Bindusara's suspicion, and possibly harm his beloved master. But there was one irrefutable truth, one fact that kept him the most from doing so: he was a Shudra and as such was despised, without rights, without authority! He kept silent.

The Maharajah seemed disposed to go along with the advice of the priest.

Sayana approached the physician.

'Are you able to provide proof, Ratnaka, that you are right?'

'Sire, two months ago Chandaka had the same drug given to Varisara. After that had happened, Varisara wanted to inform the Maharajah, but Chandaka ordered him forthwith to set out on a pilgrimage to Khasi Manipura in furthestmost India.'

'Well, Sire, call back Varisara, then you can unmask the liar.' Chandaka replied calmly. 'Varisara himself had chosen the pilgrimage, so did he confess to me, because Ratnaka expected him to be completely cured after that journey. Two Brahmins saw him off. They warned him of the tigers in the jungle but they could not stop him from his holy journey. You see, honoured assembly, the physician attempts with all kinds of lies to conceal his treachery.'

'Why did you not openly convey your secret, Ratnaka?' Sayana asked.

That was the crucial question, precisely the one that Ratnaka could not answer.

'Sire, I wished to protect the Maharajah against the dangerous priests. Today, I was no longer able to, that is why I made my disclosure.'

'When the tiger is trapped, Sire, he retracts his claws. Force him, through torture, to speak the truth.'

'Torture him ... Udra. I want to know.'

Ratnaka fell to the ground before the Emperor.

'Gracious Maharajah, they will kill me, like they did Varisara. And then you are not safe anymore from those ...'

Even before he could finish, Bindusara's suspicion had been aroused. He made a sign for his order to be executed.

‘Almighty Lord, I will have two witnesses within a few days.’

The Maharajah waved his hand again, tired, and then laid down on his bed, motionless. Ratnaka was taken away, and all present presumed that a court of Brahmins would execute the order of the Maharajah the next day. Chandaka, however, was in haste; he followed the physician right away and appointed speedily a court of three Brahmins who immediately prepared themselves for the judgement.

In the room of the Maharajah, calm had returned after the exciting turn of events. Sayana tried to do what he could to lessen the suffering of his Lord. It seemed as though Bindusara had fallen asleep. The truth was, Ratnaka’s information had touched the Maharajah deeply and turbulent thoughts brought with them great tension; his decision to hand out a sentence was not to uphold justice against injustice, but the strange physician against the Brahmin-court. In the weak state he was in, it gave him a feeling of great uncertainty. It was an inevitable mistake, he thought.

Into the high-pitched sounds of the night, entering into the room from the park, merged another heavy sound, like thunder from afar. Khallataka listened sharply ... Horses? Crossing the bridge over the Son? The sound ceased.

‘Ha!’ he whispered, but in the silence all heard what he said. ‘That is the Viceroy of Ujjain!’

Frightened, as if an earthquake was rumbling through the country, they looked at each other. Sayana saw how the face of the Maharajah had suddenly swelled and his Majesty was about to swoon. He dashed forward and ordered cooling water to be brought quickly. With the help of Khallataka he brought the patient back to consciousness and noticed that Chandaka, who was supposed to be present, had vanished without the permission of the Emperor or Khallataka who had temporarily taken over. He alerted the first minister about it.

‘One who flees is accusing himself, wise Sayana. We will see tomorrow at the court.’

‘Ratnaka!’

They heard a body of riders approaching the palace. And then halting. A little later, Ashoka threw himself down before the Maharajah and kissed his hand.

‘Father ... you are very sick!’

Bindusara put his hand on the head of the young Viceroy. In his look, calm suddenly came back as if the fierce uncertainty was no longer a pain in his soul. Then his hands clasped the arm of his strong son.

Khallataka approached the Maharajah.

‘Gracious Maharajah of Aryavarta, appoint now the successor to the throne. This is the son whose vigour is pronounced, as is meant in the 13th line of the 13th prakarana in the *Arthashastra*. He is the proper one to rule because he has learned compassion by work and suffering.’

Bindusara looked up at his son. Then he spoke, his voice hoarse:

‘My son, the Crown Prince ...’ His mouth moved slightly, yet no sound came from his lips. His heart stilled. His hand, which lay as a blessing on Ashoka’s head, went limp.

Sayana approached, and examined the Emperor.

To the Viceroy he said: ‘The Maharajah has passed beyond, Sire.’

All knelt down and lowered their heads to the floor. The magician lit the fires. When the first prayers were completed, Ashoka asked that more palace guards be sent to watch over the remains of his beloved Father. Priests arrived to perform prayers for the deceased and to bring the ritual sacrifices to the gods.

‘Let us withdraw into the council chamber,’ Khallataka said at last. ‘Warn without delay the other ministers and Nata,’ he ordered Radhagupta.

‘Where is Ratnaka? I thought he was treating my father.’

‘Ratnaka has been imprisoned a while ago, accused of wanting to kill the Maharajah.’

Ashoka was shocked. ‘But a few days ago, he sent Satyavat to me with the urgent message that Chandaka wanted to undertake dangerous experiments with the Maharajah. That is proof enough of his innocence! Where is he now?’

‘In prison, we think.’

‘Or in the court hall,’ Sayana thought worriedly.

Ashoka rushed out. In the court hall, Ratnaka had just been tortured with swords because he refused to acknowledge the accusation which the head priest charged him with. Chandaka had been in a great haste.

‘Stop it!’ Ashoka roared, so that all jumped back, frightened, ‘Untie him!’

Then he knelt down before Ratnaka, lifting up his head carefully.

‘Thank Indra that you are here ... Sire, Chandaka wanted me to give the Maharajah a drug that would kill him. You once risked your life, Sire ... to save mine. Now ... I give mine for you.’

Ashoka took the suffering Revata in his arms.

‘Call in Sayana! No! No, my Revata.’

‘Shudra, Sire,’ whispered the tormented one.

‘*Tat Tvam Asi*, my great friend!’

Revata smiled, and took his last breath. Ashoka laid him down on a pallet and covered him with his own cloak.

‘Who has sentenced Ratnaka!’ he burst out.

‘I, O, Raja. He wished to kill the Maharajah.’

‘Who drove him to his death?’

‘He chose to, himself, Sire.’

‘Who has called for this court?’

‘The Maharajah, Sire.’

‘And who appointed the three members?’

‘I, Sire.’

‘You! Only the Maharajah has the authority to do so, priest!’

‘The holy Maharajah lay ill, Sire.’

‘Then it was Khallataka, who was charged with the administration! Who ordered the harsh torturing?’

‘I, as the head of the court.’

‘Why such haste, Chandaka?’

‘It concerned the Maharajah.’

‘Are you the one to decide so? Know, Chandaka, that you interfered in the rights of the Mauryas in an extreme and unlawful way. You are my prisoner, together with the two other members of this unlawful court. Sagka, you guard these rebels against the Mauryas.’

‘Who tortured Ratnaka, the physician?’

‘We, Sire,’ the three executioners replied in unison.

‘On whose orders?’

The three looked at each other timidly. ‘On the orders of the head of the court, Sire.’

‘On whose order did you kill him? You keep silent! I ask you once more: On whose order did you kill the physician, Ratnaka?’

Again, the three kept silent.

‘Lock them up separately, Sagka.’



THE THIRD MAURYA

Ashoka came back to the Council Hall; on his face was seen no trace of the emotion or of the anger that raged inside.

When the full council of ministers had arrived, Khallataka made known the death of the Maharajah.

‘Here. until now, have I performed my duty. I herewith place the temporary administration of the empire in the hands of Prince Ashoka, the Viceroy of Ujjain, because the Maharajah in the last moments of his life appointed him as the Crown Prince. I request you to proclaim an oath of fealty which will bind you until the anointment of the new Maharajah is performed.’

Udra rose. ‘Highly respected Khallataka, there is no evidence that the Maharajah did point to Prince Ashoka as his successor. The Emperor did not entirely complete his last words because Yama took him by surprise. He could very well have said: ‘My son ... the Crown Prince ... is Sumana!’ as: ‘the Crown Prince is Ashoka’. Because the significance of the last words of the Maharajah was very doubtful, the eldest should succeed!’

‘I have often spoken with the Maharajah about the succession and was always under the impression, that, as in the past, the Viceroy of Ujjain was to succeed although our wise Lord did not express this earlier. As his life

was ebbing away, however, the Maharajah said to Prince Ashoka: 'My son, the Crown Prince.' I request the venerable Sayana to state his opinion.'

'Maharajah Bindusara discussed often with me the succession. It was always his intention to place Ashoka on the ivory throne. The Maharajah has said, while speaking to Ashoka: 'My son, the Crown Prince.'

'And so I call upon all of you to swear the temporary oath of fealty.'

Udra refused and left the hall.

'That being so, you, high Viceroy of Ujjain, are now the Maharajah. We entrust to you the further course of proceedings. I hope that you will reign as I expect you to. Then Aryavarta will be as blessed as it was under the reign of your wise and holy Father and Grandfather.'

'I request with gratitude the ministers to continue the work that my beloved Father entrusted to them. No decision, no word, no gesture between you and me must ever, without my explicit permission, go outside the circle of myself and my ministers. If you do not regard yourself as being capable of keeping this pledge or if you do not wish to do so then my immediate request is: refuse the ministerial office and leave the council. When you stay behind you have bound yourself with your life to me, under these conditions.'

Arada, the father-in-law of Sumana, rose from his seat.

'Honoured Raja of Ujjain, I have admired your skill as the chief of the army and as the ruler in the West. But I am a Brahmin and deem myself bound to the Vedas. I know that no Brahmin priest will anoint you as the Maharajah, because the oldest son of the Maharajah lays his rightful claim to the throne. According to my conscience, he is entitled to do so. Hence, I cannot comply with your binding conditions. I refuse to be your minister and seek your permission to leave this meeting.'

'I know, highly respected Arada, that your honesty is beyond doubt, like the lotus flower rising above the muddy bed of the pond. Thus, at your request I discharge you.' After Arada had left, Ashoka continued: 'Besides the ministers who have remained loyal, I need some men of great dedication and skill. I now appoint Prince Kala as the Viceroy of Ujjain; Sela will be commander-in-chief of the army in Pataliputra; Nata, superintendent of the palace guard, will be the mahamatra of the Intelligence Services; and Satyavat will be superintendent of the Palace Guard. May I hear the opinion of my wise friend Sayana on these decisions?'

‘What I have until now admired most in my young friend, Prince Ashoka, is his genuine insight in overseeing the affairs of State in this great empire, and the correct choice of his confidants. Therefore, I think we can leave to him, with confidence, the choice of these important employees.’

‘And you, my respected ministers?’

All kept silent, signalling their approval.

‘Then I request you all to come here tomorrow in the second *kalakramein* of the day to define our position towards Prince Sumana.’

The attendants stood up and prepared to leave.

‘It would please me however, if you could be present yet at the first administration of justice that I will perform now instantly, as the Maharajah. Radhagupta and Khallataka will form, together with me, the court.

In the courtroom, the young Maharajah ordered that the three executioners be led in.

‘Take the oath that you will speak the truth, not subject to anyone. Be reminded what this oath means in my empire, according to eternal laws: Your ancestors are in a state of uncertainty while they are awaiting your answers; depending upon the truth or falsehood of your statements, they will go to heaven or fall into hell. The man who gives false evidence will be naked, stripped of his honour and plagued by hunger and thirst. On earth the Maharajah will sentence you if you speak untruth. And my sentence will not be light.’

After the taking of the oath, Ashoka repeated the same question:

‘On whose order did you kill Ratnaka?’ When none of the three men answered, Ashoka called out furiously: ‘Torture with the same swords with which Ratnaka was tortured.’

Horror-struck, the three fell down on the ground before him.

‘Sire ... Chandaka has forbidden us to speak and threatened us with the curse of the Brahmins,’ Damka whined.

‘You have sworn the oath because of which you have to speak the truth. Chandaka appointed himself the judge, the Maharajah did not speak!’

‘Sire, Chandaka gave orders to kill him if he refused to plead guilty. When Ratnaka heard the sound of hooves on the bridge over the Sona, he called out: ‘Ha, Raja Ashoka!’ With every torment, he refused to confess. Then Chandaka gave us the pre-arranged sign, whereupon we killed the physician.’

‘Bring in Chandaka, Sagka.’

‘When did the Maharajah appoint you to judge Ratnaka?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘At that time my Father did not mistrust Ratnaka!’ Chandaka started. ‘So, you are lying. Why were the executioners ordered to kill Ratnaka?’

‘Sire, I ordered him to be tortured, not killed.’

‘You lie again. Damka, declare what you acknowledged to all of us a moment ago.’

Without looking up, Damka made the same declaration, in the same words.

‘Why did you allow Ratnaka to be killed, Chandaka?’

‘Because he wanted to poison the Maharajah. I do not know yet at whose order,’ he added brazenly, looking up at Ashoka.

‘For the third time you are lying, Chandaka, highest priest of the Brahmin-court. Ratnaka sent me a message two weeks ago to come to Pataliputra as fast as possible, because you wanted to force him to administer to the Maharajah an anaesthetic drug which his heart might not have been able to bear. So, you wanted to get rid of a difficult witness.’

‘No.’

‘Torture the liar with nails!’ A sharp nail was pushed under the nail of his thumb. A shrill scream filled the room. When they brought the second nail, Chandaka screamed: ‘Yes!’

‘Stop!’ Ashoka commanded the one administering the torture. He turned to the priest once again. ‘So, Why did you send Varisara on his dangerous journey to Khasi Manipura?’

‘He chose his own fate, Sire.’

‘You lie again! Bring in Varisara, Sagka.’ The priest’s face turned white; he reeled.

‘Varisara, perform the oath as a witness and tell us what happened to you.’

Varisara narrated all that had happened. ‘Then I took the road to Khasi, but about an hour later, I heard hoof-beats behind me. Two riders of Sagka rode up, telling me that they had to bring me back to Pataliputra, and that I did not need to fear Chandaka. Sela has kept me out of sight in the camp for some months.’

‘You wanted to give the Maharajah a drug which, according to the most capable physician of Taxila, would have killed the Emperor, Chandaka.’

‘Varisara is insane, Sire. Therefore, he cannot be permitted to be a witness.’

‘Now you, Satyavat, say the oath. Right. Is what Varisara said true?’

‘Yes, Sire, from beginning to end.’

‘So, you wanted to force the Maurya, the ruling Emperor of Aryavarta, to effectuate your own will, at the risk of killing him. You, who as a priest of the Brahmin-court had to protect your Overlord in the first place!’

‘Sire ... that same medication did not harm Varisara. I thought ...’

‘Ratnaka, who knew better than you, warned you more than once. But you confess to the deed!’

Chandaka kept silent.

‘You do not?’

Chandaka looked at the Maharajah insolently but kept his mouth shut.

‘Sagka, the swords!’

Chandaka, who saw that the Raja meant it, then replied hesitatingly: ‘Yes, Sire.’

‘And the two other judges knew that you wanted to give the Maharajah the deadly drug?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Do you acknowledge that, Lambawa?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘And you, Panthaka?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Do you have anything to ask yet, judges Khallataka and Radhagupta?’

The two judges kept silent.

‘Then I punish these three Brahmins with the most severe sentence reserved for their varna: death by drowning in the Ganga, because they have attempted to murder the reigning Maharajah of Aryavarta and permitted the judicial killing of the physician of the Maharajah. Tomorrow morning at the rising of Surya, the sentence will be carried out. Sagka, you will make sure this sentence is carried out to the letter. Herewith I end this court.’

When at last Ashoka and Khallataka were the only ones left in the empty hall, the old minister said: ‘Grant them a reprieve, Sire. Hard labour

in the mines of the Himalayas is also a very severe sentence for these priests. The Brahmin-court is powerful in your empire.'

'It is because of that I want to let them feel what the limits are under my reign. I do not tolerate an infringement on the rights of the Mauryas. The priests have to know who is now ruling Pataliputra. They, as the first ones!'

'I fear remorse may come after the deed.'

'Not a whit do I want to give in to these assassins who do not spare the Mauryan Princes nor the Maharajah himself!' Khallataka bent his head.

'Now I have to ask of you a great service, my respected Khallataka.'

'Any service you ask of me is like an order to me, O, Maharajah.'

'I cannot lose a minute in my measures concerning the army. Therefore, go immediately to the army camp and appoint Sela as the army chief. Then you are to summon the chiefs of the different army units and report to them the death of the Maharajah and my succession. Sela knows what he has to do.'

Khallataka left. Ashoka made sure that he was escorted by a strong body of guards.

When the chiefs of the army brigades gathered in the audience hall on the orders of Khallataka, he spoke to them:

'Noble Kshatriyas, with great sadness in my heart, I have to inform you that our sacred Maharajah has departed from the earth to enter the kingdom of Yama.' All of them bowed deeply and began praying for the soul of the beloved Emperor.

'I understand your grief which cannot be deeper than mine. As the oldest minister, I knew and respected the Maharajah. Bindusara's son, Ashoka, who was appointed by the Maharajah before his death to be Crown Prince and successor, as I and Sayana and others present can bear witness, immediately accepted his kingship. He is now your Maharajah.'

All had listened to Khallataka in deep silence. Soon, Prince Sampadi could restrain himself no longer. Outwardly calm and with a steadfast voice, he commenced:

'Honoured minister Khallataka, know, that we will not recognise my brother Ashoka as Maharajah. In the name of the lawful successor, Sumana, I take over the command of the army, until the Crown Prince appears in

Pataliputra. Tell me, commanders of the units, if you will obey me till that time.'

'Yes!' The cry thundered through the hall.

Khallataka went on quietly. 'Allow me, as the oldest minister of Emperor Bindusara, to convey to you the further decisions of the Maharajah. The Kshatriya Sela is appointed as Commander-in-Chief and you are all discharged from the army. Only Sela can recruit you again.'

The response of the soldiers was jeering laughter. Sampadi jumped up and cried:

'Friends, return to your units! Take care that all arm themselves! In the name of the Crown Prince and the rightful Maharajah Sumana, I order you to be prepared at all times for the battle against the Raja who thinks he can unlawfully appropriate for himself the ivory throne! Take this message to the rebel, O, Khallataka. Come on friends, the army obeys me, till such time your rightful leader comes!'

Everyone rushed excitedly to the doors. Outside, Sela had silently laid siege to the building with a large body of heavily armed riders whom he could trust fully.

'Lay down your arms and surrender to the army chief of the new Maharajah!' Sela called out calmly.

'Not to the army chief of a throne-thief,' Sampadi cried, and attacked Sela fiercely. Others followed.

'Imprison them!' Sela's voice was heard over the erupting noise. A violent fight followed but Sela had picked very experienced soldiers who were also far more in number. Soon, the supporters of Sumana were overcome, and only Prince Sampadi continued to fight like a madman.

'Surrender, Prince Sampadi, and you will be allowed to leave the camp in freedom.'

'I do not want a favour from robbers. You ... or I ... chief of the army!'

Calmly, Sela turned towards him and in a fierce battle the Prince received a fatal blow from the sword of one of the most experienced soldiers in Ashoka's army. Sumana's friends were transported to the prisoners' camp that Sela had arranged since long.

Early in the morning, long before Ushas set the eastern horizon aglow, the most trustworthy squad of some thousands of horsemen left for the capital, in support of the new Maharajah.

Nata had gathered in the big hall the inhabitants of the ladies' quarters as well as the children of the Maharajah who were minors. There, Ashoka informed them of the death of Bindusara.

'In the future, you will have to place yourselves under my authority as Maharajah,' he finished. At first there was silence. Gopali fainted and was carried back to her room by the female slaves, accompanied by Jalini and other friends. Subhadraangi went pale with emotion and could scarcely utter a word. She embraced her son. Hara and Samgati offered their expressions of joy to the young Emperor and a few Princes followed their example.

There was great excitement in the capital. The death of the Maharajah was announced by a town crier, accompanied by the heavy thudding of the *dhol*, the big drum. To the great surprise of the people it was announced that Ashoka would be the successor. Everywhere the people of the town clustered together. The craftsmen left their work, the merchants their markets, the masters their ships on the Ganga; everyone rushed to the centre of the town. More and more people were gathering along the Emperor's Road. News became rumour, and the rumours swelled in no time, growing into the wildest of legends. And while the bards sang praises about the fame of the deceased Maharajah, and the women wept emotionally, the first offerings were brought in by the pious citizens. Meanwhile, the *ghantas*, the big gongs of the temples, rang loud and sonorous all over the town. Friends of the Brahmin-court mingled with the excited crowds, adding to the unrest. They whispered about the unlawfulness of Ashoka's succession.

'How is it possible the Wild Prince arrived so swiftly in Pataliputra?'

'Well, through the air, of course. He is the very Lord of the three worlds! Shiva!'

'Lord of the hells! That is more fitting,' a stranger risked saying.

'Mind what you say, priest-crow!'

'The Wild Prince has proclaimed himself Maharajah. How dare he! Soon, the Crown Prince will return with his army from Taxila, and then we can fear the worst.'

'Do you think that Prince Ashoka fears Prince Sumana? Incarnation of Shiva, god of death!'

'And of life!' called out a sword-maker, who had crafted chakras for Ashoka.

‘The Maharajah must have died of fear when the ferocious warrior entered.’ Many of them looked fearfully at the speaker.

‘No wonder. The look from his eye slays a wild elephant,’ someone else added.

‘They say he had Prince Sampadi killed last night, when he arrived from Ujjain. Prince Sampadi wanted the eldest Prince to succeed.’

‘On top of that he killed with his sword the palace physician, Ratnaka, when Chandaka wanted to protect Bindusara.’

‘Minister Khallataka, who takes the side of Ashoka, had along with Radhagupta dressed Ashoka in the clothes of Sumana; he then put all his ornaments on him and applied saffron on Ashoka’s face so that he would resemble Sumana and then he let him hastily be appointed as the Crown Prince by the Maharajah who had nearly lost consciousness. So, he thought it was really his eldest son that he appointed. A palace slave told me so.’

‘A fine way to steal a throne!’ risked the same stranger.

‘The whole harem has opposed Ashoka’s succession and he has locked them all up in their chambers. Any Prince or Princess who speaks out in favour of Sumana will be killed without mercy. They say that several brothers and sisters of the Wild Prince have already been killed. A young priest of the Brahmin-court told me.’

‘The sacrificial priests can expect little favours from him. The soldiers say he never performs sacrifices.’

‘But he has nothing to expect from the priests either,’ a sharp-tongued penitent called out.

‘How can the government of Aryavarta be entrusted to someone who never offers sacrifices! Prince Sumana is a pious man.’

‘And Prince Ashoka is Shiva himself! Why then should he perform sacrifices to the gods! Krishna appears on earth when people are in distress; Shiva, when law and order almost collapses, because of the greed of certain subjects,’ a martial Kshatriya cried out, one who hated the sacrificial priests.

‘Who do you dare accuse of greed here?’ the penitent called angrily and many bystanders turned against the Kshatriya.

‘They say that Ashoka wants to kill all the priests of the Brahmin-court,’ the stranger said. ‘At sunrise, the first three will be drowned in the Ganga.’

‘Keep quiet. There come heavily armed riders. They are accomplices of Ashoka!’

‘Let us go to the Ganga, I want to see if he dares to! The army chiefs will not tolerate it!’ the penitent called out excitedly.

‘Yes, let us go, let us go!’

‘The army chiefs have already been thrown to the tigers. A warrior just told me that all have been made prisoners and transported to the tiger-jungles out in the east. I would not even wager a dead ant for their lives. Prince Mudra has fled to Sumana. Sela, the chief of the cavalry, has been appointed as commander-in-chief of the army of the new Maharajah.’

‘But Prince Sumana is already on his way with a huge army to claim his rights. So, let us keep our spirits up.’

‘Keep quiet, the riders are coming! Keep your mouths shut.’

‘Come on, let us go to the Ganga!’

‘Let us release the priests!’ the stranger whispered excitedly.

‘Take care or we will throw you headlong into the holy Ganga, too. Or, have you been sent here by the priests?’ a tall Ganga-skipper called out.

A strong body of horsemen galloped by, scattering all apart like the first swirls of the south-east monsoon does the dry leaves.

At the Ganga, a huge multitude of people was already gathering. Most of them were looking at the river, moved, while others told all kinds of tales of the previous night. Close to the river where the ferry was moored, an area was marked off with three rows of soldiers on horseback, and everywhere there were groups of heavily armed riders stationed amongst the people. A shiver went through the crowd. In the middle of a new body of horsemen the three priests approached, heads bowed. A clamorous and sinister muttering hissed its way through the crowd: Was it true that the Wild Prince attacked the holy varna of the Brahmins! No Brahmin could ever be killed, so was it taught in Madhyadesa. Did he dare to violate the holy laws of Aryavarta? The excitement grew. When the group neared the Ganga, Sagka climbed on to a small platform.

‘Silence!’ he roared. A frightened silence quickly fell upon the crowd.

‘Chandaka, chief of the Brahmin-court, which is sustained by the sacred Maharajah, answer me! Did you form, illegally, a court, without the sanction of the Maharajah?’ Chandaka looked around. If he could retract his confession now, then maybe, he could get the backing of the crowd. It

swarmed with warriors. But he also knew that he would be caught immediately and tortured without mercy. It was of no use. He nodded.

‘Did you give the order to kill Ratnaka, the physician of the Maharajah, because he was a difficult witness?’ Again, the priest nodded.

‘Did you force Ratnaka to give the Maharajah a potion which you knew could kill him?’ For a moment the priest wavered again, looked at the crowd, the multitude of soldiers. Finally he nodded, tired.

‘And you knew about all this and let it happen, Panthaka?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘And you knew this, Lambada, and let it happen?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Now, release your priests!’ the Ganga-skipper called mockingly to the stranger who shrank away, dismayed.

‘Therefore, your attempt to murder the Maharajah and your ill-judged murder of the physician Ratnaka will be punished with the highest sentence that can be passed on to a Brahmin: drowning in the Ganga. Your death is brought on by yourself. So wills Maharajah Ashoka,’ Sagka finished.

The indignation of the people over what the Brahmins had done was now greater than the tremors of revolt earlier. Nevertheless, a shiver went through the crowd on the banks of the river, when the ferry with the three criminals set sail and stopped in the middle of the river, where the outrageous sentence was executed quickly and smoothly. Did Ashoka not fear the revenge of the gods! Would not the devas come to release the priests? Was it true that the Wild Prince was Shiva, the Lord of death? Aghast, not only at the crimes of the Brahmins but also at the ruthless will of the new Maharajah that spared no one, all returned to the city in an excited state. Sela’s horsemen were spread throughout the crowd, thereby forestalling any riots that could have started. At the quays on the Ganga where trade was conducted were the storerooms of the rich merchants. These merchants were partly on the side of the Brahmin priests and Sumana. They brought many offerings to the priests to ensure profitable trade and for the protection of their goods. They felt satisfied with this arrangement. Their profits were always ample and certain. Thanks to their wealth and might, they behaved more freely than the other inhabitants of the capital. One of the merchants who was asked to pay his dues, violently

refused to do so. He offered to pay only a small part of the levy that was due.

‘You know, Sudgata, the Maharajah never asks more than what is his rightful share.’

‘There is no Maharajah! We only have a Crown Prince!’

‘Then do not oppose the Crown Prince who always abides by the law.’

‘The Crown Prince is far away!’ Sudgata called out furiously.

‘You are taking a big risk, Sudgata! You better pay, or we will take you before the court.’

‘I only recognise the law of the lawful Maharajah!’ shouted the merchant in a fit of temper.

‘Take that impertinent fellow a prisoner,’ the palace officer called out.

Sudgata was brought to the palace at a gallop, and immediately taken before the Maharajah.

‘Sudgata, so you do not recognise me as the Maharajah.’

‘No, Sire.’

‘Why not?’

‘Sire, I had hoped ... that Prince Sumana would succeed.’

‘Do you expect that with him you would have more success with your trade?’

‘No, Sire. But the Prince used to borrow a lot of money, from me, too. For his gambling. And Prakriti. He had promised to return everything and more after he ascends the throne. If you become the Maharajah, we stand to lose large amounts of gold, Sire. The Emperor Bindusara had not supplied him with sufficient means, Sire.’

‘And is that the only reason?’

‘Yes, Sire, he had borrowed all my wealth.’

‘You are like a lotus flower, Sudgata. It grows and blooms in the pond in which people plant it and praise it. Do you have proof of your loans?’

‘They are at my house, Sire.’

‘Go with my guards and bring it to me. The Mauryas will pay back to you what they owe you.’ Ashoka, Radhagupta, Khallataka and the judges – neither spoke nor laughed about this affair. When Sudgata returned with the promissory notes, Ashoka paid him the dues. Back in his house, Sudgata poured a libation in honour of Ashoka, who had meted out goodness and

justice and praised his fairness. Soon, there appeared many more creditors, all with similar claims, and always with the same result. That soon took away the merchants' dissatisfaction.

In spite of Ashoka's strong army, social unrest grew, and the people were instigated. They mocked merchants who paid taxes to what they called 'illegal' government; they were indignant about the troops in the city who they said ought to remain in the army camp. The artisans were asked for whom they were working: After all, the Maharajah had died and his successor as yet far off. They threatened the people with great natural disasters because the holy Brahmins were killed. Now here, then there, small street fights erupted, and Sagka and his men dragged the loud-mouths to the court where they were interrogated and tortured. It always turned out that the unrest was being fomented by the Brahmin-court. Ashoka let the Gatha be sounded, which called the priests to the general meeting of the court. The unwilling ones who did not appear, he had brought by a body of horsemen into the large auditorium. When Ashoka entered the hall, along with Nata and heavily armed bodyguards, he looked around the hall. The assembly of priests grew still under his gaze.

'Priests of the Brahmin-court: listen well to what I am going to say to you now. Minister Nata is my witness. My beloved Father has lodged you for many years on his premises, fed and clothed you, bestowed on you gifts. You enjoyed the fullest freedom to lead sacrifices or study, according to your own wishes. Now I am the Maharajah, because my Father appointed me as his successor; and because I am the one, I shall maintain my position with relentless sternness. I know, and have known for more than ten years, that you prefer my brother Sumana to me, and now attempt to undermine my authority and institutions. Beware now: Whomsoever of you, who lives in any of my houses, eats of my food, wears clothes I supply, receives my gifts and enjoys my protection, undertakes again anything that harms my rightful reign, I will sentence without mercy for high treason, to work in the mines or to be drowned in the Ganga. And all the others I shall have driven away by the cavalry, from the court and from the city, perhaps worse! The Ganga is a holy bath! Today, I wish to hear from you, as to who will be your new First Priest! The death obsequies of my beloved Father will take place within a span of two hours, priests of Pataliputra. It is your duty to perform it.'

Without saying another word or looking back, the Maharajah left the meeting hall. Everyone kept quiet out of fear of betrayal in their own circle.

At last, Sivi—thought to be sympathetic to Ashoka—started speaking.

‘I suggest we choose the oldest and wisest among us to be the First Priest of the council. In these difficult times, we need wisdom.’

Atri answered: ‘I am the oldest amongst you and refuse to serve Raja Ashoka. He knows I am on the side of Bindusara’s oldest son; he is the one who ought to succeed. Today, I will depart from this ungodly town for the hermitage, to accumulate the spiritual power which we will require in the future.’ Atri left the hall and some of the priests went along with him. Most of them, however, chose the easy life at the Brahmin-court.

‘Let Sivi become First Priest!’ ‘Yes, Sivi!’ ‘Sivi!’ It rang out from all sides. They realised that this might soothe the Raja.

Ashoka took care that everything was painstakingly organised for the funeral service in accordance with Brahmin rites, as Bindusara had wished. At the Ganga, a funeral pyre was built with fragrant logs; golden jugs filled with ghee, sweet oils, soma, prepared according to the canons, were brought to the place. Incense and sweet-smelling flowers were ready. Altars were constructed according to strict mathematical rules, facing the right direction and with the proper entrance ways.

Inside the palace, the body of the Maharajah was wrapped in a special kind of fabric, to prevent his ashes from mixing with the ash of the fire. It was then enfolded in a snow-white piece of the finest Kashi silk and placed on a bier adorned with precious gems. The bier was placed on the royal funeral cart. Then they walked in procession to the holy river. A few bards, praising the deceased, and others, chanting in sad voices, went ahead. Then the widows of the Emperor, hair undone, weeping sadly and softly, followed. After them came the Princes and Princesses, and the adorned royal elephant; then followed the ministers, highly placed employees of the many departments, and many of the faithful servants. The imperial female guards surrounded the cart with the bier to which Ashoka, as the successor, held on to with a tightly-clenched right hand. The splendid white parasol was held over the deceased as a sign of imperial dignity, while servants fanned with their *chamaras* of oxtail, to cool the distressed soul of the deceased. Behind the bier, the holy fire was carried by the Brahmin priests. Then followed the carts with gold coins and precious objects, the last gifts

from the holy Maharajah to his people, which would keep his memory alive.

When they came to the banks of the Ganga, Ashoka called for the tanunaptram of the priests, after which the sacred ceremonies began. The gods were invoked with appropriate chants from the Vedas to take part in the ceremony, and then a purified animal, cooked rice, a cow and a calf, together with ghee and pure sweet oil, were offered. Thereafter they handed the fire to Ashoka, who amidst the piteous crying of thousands of people, lit the pyre that would separate the soul from the dead body. Then the priests sprinkled water of the holy Ganga to purify the soul. All of the family members descended to the waters of the Ganga, took a handful of water from the holy river and murmured: 'O, great Maharajah, this is yours.' Ashoka, too, cupped the water in his palms and said: 'O, noblest Maharajah, may this eternal water, given to you by me, forever slake your thirst in the realm of the spirit.' Thereupon he threw the water. This was for the memory of his great Father and to give new strength to his soul. With that, the rite of the fire and the water was completed. The ashes were gathered in a golden cask, and Ashoka then threw them into the holy river. Everything had taken place the way Bindusara himself had ordained.

For a long time the young Emperor gazed out over the waves that ceaselessly flowed onwards. Not one small particle remained of the once powerful Emperor of India ... where would be his soul now? Would it be reborn again, or would it rise up to the worlds of the Devas? The Emperor had desired his son to be by his bier, lead the death ceremony. Which son! Ashoka was the cause that the imperial house did not follow its course quietly. But he knew, too, that the priests reached out for the power that belonged to the Mauryas. He had judged it necessary that the spirit of Chandragupta remained to rule. Ashoka, born out of Subhadra's noble blood, and not the priest's jester, born out of Gopali's vain body.

'Take with you, Ganga, with your waters, the last grain of dust of the great King ... to the Ocean, where no holy river surges forth, where no holy body exists anymore. Take his soul with you, Agni, to Indra's heaven, where no offering fire burns. May Shiva, god of death, who annihilated his existence, give, through Shiva of life, the power to me, to rule Aryavarta and lead it to life and truth.'

The young Maharajah stretched out his arms towards the white caps of Mount Kailasha, the abode of Shiva, and for a moment he forgot the masses

that had fallen silent behind him and then with him bowed their heads into the dust, for the soul of the holy Maharajah.

Ashoka rose and saw how, far away, on the other side of the wide waters, a priest was stretching out his arms towards him in blessing. The great Guru, the human being, the power, the solace, the holy Sayana.



THE PENITENT SALYA

Ashoka's messengers were sent to every corner of the great empire to make known the death of Bindusara and the succession of Ashoka. All the Rajas, rajukas, and purushas, were ordered to hasten to Pataliputra to pledge their fealty to the new Maharajah. Ashoka knew that Sumana would soon be on his way to the capital. How large his army was or how many people in Pataliputra and in the rest of the country would ally themselves with him, he could not even hazard a guess. He trusted his ministers and his warriors. The Brahmin-court had become ominously quiet and silent; in the city, too, people went about their daily work. However, everyone intuitively felt that the great battle was yet to come and nobody knew what it would bring.

In the Brahmin-court the priests who were fiercely opposed to Ashoka—in the greatest secrecy, and keeping the council led by Sivi out of it—had chosen a group of elders who would spearhead the support for Sumana. Ashavita and Srigupta sent out delegations to those regions where the priests exerted power, to foment trouble, and to the Rajas who were under the sway of the priests, in order to make them aware of their dissatisfaction and determination to save the country from the situation. Above all, they needed Shakuni, the energetic young priest. He had to be freed from the mines; Sunasepha was missed as well. The situation in the capital was now

in enough of an embroilment to take the risk of their returning. A mountain tribe near the Terai¹ was bribed to raid the mining camp and free the prisoners. A few weeks later, Shakuni arrived unnoticed in the capital and disappeared into one of the temples where he became the priest and soothsayer.

Sunasepha had changed a great deal over the years. His straggly beard and wild hair, his simple bark-cloth, his staring look, made him appear venerable and, thus, feared. Everything indicated his great karma and therefore his mysterious powers. As the penitent Salya, he wandered undisturbed through the streets of Pataliputra, roamed through rough places walking with a calm steady gait through groups of workers and soldiers who with feverish energy were fortifying the defences to prime condition. He appeared at the market square where he warned the people of the dark times ahead, spoke to the craftsmen and tradesmen and did not shun even the poorer quarters of the Shudras. On the great Emperor's Road, no cavalry had him scurrying to the side for none risked harming the holy penitent or even making an impatient remark. People feared his angry looks, his mumbled swearing, his wide-eyed stare. At night he prayed in the Brahma-temple where Shakuni was the soothsaying priest and passed on any news that was of interest to Shakuni or the Crown Prince. If he suspected that spies of Ashoka were shadowing him, he looked for his night shelter in dark corners, under bushes and trees, till the morning brought new work. Supported by Salya, Shakuni's omniscience was soon well-known and with that, his influence grew. Worshippers who felt threatened by the turbulent times rushed to the Brahma-temple of the wise Suni, urged on by the unbending penitent who understood so well their needs. And Suni startled the people with his knowledge, predicted their narrow escape from the fate that hung over the city, praised the Vedas and the priests, and strengthened their trust in the lawful Crown Prince. After exhaustive inquiries, Salya had concluded that the western Ganga-gate was the most suitable one, if the people were to come to aid the now approaching Raja. Who were the guards?

One night, he lay down to sleep close to the guardhouse, not far from the gate. When one of the guards came out, he had to stumble over Salya. The penitent flared out: 'Wretch! Do you trample a holy man, who has scorched himself between the five fires to raise his powers to that of the Maruts! I curse ...'

‘Curse me not, sir! Curse me not!’ begged the soldier and fell down to his knees. ‘Sir, I did not see you. And I will need all the support of the gods when I become the second-in-command of the foot-soldiers. Do not destroy my good fortune, Sir!’

‘Whose second-in-command?’

‘Of course, of Maharajah Ashoka, Sir!’

‘Of course? And if Prince Sumana returns?’

‘They say that the Maharajah himself is a god, Shiva.’

‘Ashoka has not yet been anointed, and it is said that the priests will anoint Sumana.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘From Suni of the Brahma-temple, who is all-knowing.’

‘Does he know everything about me too, Sir?’

‘Certainly!’ Salya kept drawing him out and Simha decided to go to Suni the next day. Suni appeared to know everything about the guard, so much so that Simha yielded to utter wonder.

‘Sir, what will happen to me?’

Suni reflected for a long time whilst throwing incense into the flames. ‘Husband of Sari ... Army chief of the lawful Maharajah ... if you will be loyal to him ...’

‘Who is the lawful Maharajah, Sir?’

‘That you know as well as I do. The Maharajah whom the Brahmins anoint!’

‘But I serve ...’ He was interrupted. ‘You serve, whom the gods want you to serve.’

‘Yes, Sir. Army chief, you say, Sir?’

‘Yes, that is how I see it. Choose the correct side!’

Simha did not know what to do. At night time while he was on guard, Salya drew near again.

‘So, here it is safe, close to the guards, Simha. And what has Suni told you?’

‘I’ll have Sari and will be commander-in-chief. But I cannot believe it!’

‘Suni never foretold what did not happen. Remember, the gods are hard on those who oppose them. I will lie down now, do not disturb me anymore.’

One more thing, Simha: be silent, silent, silent! The gods severely punish those who utter even one word that does not please them.'

Simha's friends, influenced by Salya, visited the soothsayer, one after the other. The treachery was spreading rapidly and silently everywhere. Outside the city, too, spread dissension against the new Maharajah. The Raja of Malani openly declared that he would obey Sumana. Soon, a thousand cavalymen appeared before his fortress. When he wanted to surrender to save his life, the warriors jeered at him.

'Conditions for Shiva?' The fort was destroyed with all its inhabitants ... thus desired the new Maharajah.

Vaishyas living along the Bhagavati were incited by some priests not to pay their harvest levies to the new Maharajah. In a short time, Sumana would be Maharajah so they would have to pay again! Sagka demanded as punishment a double payment of the dues and transported both priests to Pataliputra, where they were sentenced by Ashoka to labour in the mines. Sagka was to bring them there with a troop of horse soldiers. His route passed by the hermitage of Sayana, so Sayana advised him to take more soldiers along with him, since armed Ragis, a mountain tribe of the Himalayas, had often been seen at a short distance from the hermitage. Sagka quickly returned to the capital and informed Ashoka.

'Take thrice as many soldiers and punish the Ragis severely. Leave the army camp at dark. I will take care of the ferry.'

Sagka found the bridge over the River Gandaki destroyed. After the bridge had been repaired, they pursued the Ragis.

The imprisoned Ragis were forced, through severe threats and torture, to tell Sagka of the occurrences. Then Sagka rushed towards the mountains, to the mines at the Gandaki. He found them destroyed. Not a living soul was left. He began his punitive expedition against the mountain tribe. Each Ragi he could get hold of, was led to the camp, questioned, tortured and killed. When, hours later, no more could be found, Sagka returned to Pataliputra.

Ashoka listened with amazement. 'Who gave order to destroy the camp, Sagka?'

'It is certain that Sunasepha was a party to it, O, Maharajah.'

'So, again the Brahmin-court. Where are the prisoners and Shakuni?'

'The Ragis say, towards Pataliputra.'

‘How I miss my friend Revata, Sagka.’

‘Maharajah Bindusara had very proficient spies, Sire. Girika was one of them. And Maskarin. Nata says that Girika has spied on you for years.’

‘Girika? I have never met him, Sagka! Send him to me. And Maskarin?’

‘Spied on Prince Sumana and later Sela.’

‘Let them come to me tonight.’

‘Girika ... You know me.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘What do you know about me?’

‘Everything, Sire. From the moment Kullika became your Guru till the death of the holy Maharajah. I was your servant during all your lessons, followed you on all your walks, saw the thunderstorm at the Barren Mountain, the sacrificial offering of Jivaka, and the release of Sasarman. I was in Taxila, in Sayana’s hermitage, Sire, and saw how you killed three Brahmins. I was in Ujjain and came back together with you.’

‘So, you were my bad conscience, Girika.’

‘Your good conscience, Sire.’

‘And I never detected you! How was that possible, Girika?’

‘The craft of a good spy lies in not being discovered, Sire.’

‘And I did not understand how my father knew everything about me!’

‘Then my work would have been worthless, Sire.’

‘And would you like to work now for me, Girika?’

‘Gladly, O, Maharajah.’

‘And you, Maskarin ... You too were a spy for my father.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Did you ever spy on me?’

‘I am sorry not to have, O, Maharajah. That was Girika’s duty. It is more enviable to follow the one whom the great Maharajah favoured as successor than the one whom he had to exclude from a fundamental right.’

‘After all, your investigations served the same purpose.’

‘But it is more uplifting to walk the impelling plains of the Ganga than trudge the desert under Surya’s scorching rays.’

‘Prince Sumana yearns for the greatness of the Maharajah.’

‘The Vaishya who uses his hallowed ground merely to augment his own wealth or enjoyment, is not worthy of his land; the Brahmin who uses his superior mind merely to obtain higher fees for his sacrifices, not of his varna; the Raja who cares for his own enjoyment, his whims and greatness as his sole endeavour, not of his kingdom, Sire ... I have followed Sumana many years ... and have sensed with growing fear how the disastrous grey bank of clouds clustered itself ominously over Aryavarta ... Now the storm has passed over and the heavenly nectar drenches the fields, O, Maharajah.’

‘You flatter me, Maskarin.’

‘No, Sire, for me it was the demolition of a dreaming Emperor’s palace ... for Girika it was the erection of a temple for a victorious deity ...’

‘Shakuni and Sunasepha, who were exiled for life from Pataliputra and Magadha by my father, thought times turbulent enough to burrow themselves again in the capital. I have to know where! They teach treachery to my troops. You have to find out where and how. Report tomorrow at the mahamatrya of information, the department of the secret service.

‘Sire, we wish to serve you with the same faithfulness with which we served your holy Father.’

The Emperor summoned Satyavat.

‘Have the first three bed-chambers made ready, my Satyavat. Sometimes in the middle of the night I have this premonition of danger ... then I should be able to move quickly to another sleeping place.’

‘As you wish, O, Maharajah. Your rooms are guarded by heavily armed and completely trustworthy female guards, Sire.’

‘Jocarno succeeded in entering the palace in the middle of the night.’

‘I have examined the guards who take care of your security very carefully, Sire, threatened them with the most horrible torture for the rest of their lives, which they will not escape even if Prince Sumana were to become the Emperor. They are all trustworthy friends of Rohini, Sire. And she checks with female wiles, day after day, their dedication to you. You really need not change your sleeping chamber for the night. Rohini has more fear of Sumana than of all the demons and Mara together. She and I, we thank our good fortune to you alone, Sire.’

‘But the ladies’ quarters, Satyavat ... the half-brothers and sisters who expect more from the squandering Sumana than from me?’

‘Nobody enters or leaves the quarters without me knowing it, Sire. I permit not the slightest chance of danger from that side.’

‘Think, too, of the Brahmin-court.’

‘Sire, no priest can take a step in the park without being watched. Nata has arranged some of the best spies for me.’

‘Realise, Sayavat, that Sumana’s only hope lies in my death.’

After Satyavat left the room he first checked the bed-chambers of his Lord: each corner, each curtain, each piece of cloth could hide death within, even the secret door to the escape exit. Then he checked all the posts of the guards who were standing invisible in galleries, niches and behind bushes. They all whispered softly their ‘Shiva’ to him. Satyavat stood still: something was moving close to the path that led to the blue lotus pond near the priests’ quarters. On the signal of a kokila’s call, some four guards joined him soundlessly. One of them whispered in his ear:

‘A spy of the Maharajah says that a suspected penitent is inside the park.’

Satyavat himself followed the stranger who disappeared into the Brahmin-court. A shrill peacock call screeched through the air, the warning sign for the spies inside that court. He waited calmly. Girika suddenly appeared from the park and told him that Salya had entered.

‘Let him go wherever he wants to.’

‘After a fairly long time they saw the penitent leaving the court and disappearing in the direction of the gate. Satyavat grabbed hold of him.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Sleeping.’

‘Whom did you visit in the Brahmin-court?’

‘I did not visit the court.’

‘How did you enter the park?’

‘On ... my ... legs.’

‘So, there is someone who let you in. You know, Salya, you deserve the penalty of death.’

‘Kill me if I deserve it,’ mocked Salya. ‘I was looking for a quiet place only for my tired limbs.’

‘Who allowed you to enter?’

‘The gatekeeper gave me permission to sleep inside the gate. There it is safe. A penitent one does not refuse.’

‘You are playing with the life of the gatekeeper. What did you do in the Brahmin-court?’

‘I asked for shelter. They refused because I was not allowed inside the palisades of the park.’

‘In the city there is plenty of room for you as for any stranger who asks for it, Salya ... Go.’

Satyavat saw how the penitent had been led outside the park furtively by the gatekeeper. A moment later, Girika followed. Salya was the object of special attention. The penitent felt himself safe. But Satyavat led the negligent gatekeeper to the Maharajah.

‘Why did you let the penitent enter?’

‘He is a holy man, O, Maharajah, and asked for a place to lie down.’

‘Did you ask for permission from the chieftain of the sentries?’

After a pause, the gatekeeper replied: ‘No, O, Maharajah.’

‘Then you have violated your most important order! Why?’ The guard kept silent, confused.

‘You know Salya?’

‘Yes, O, Maharajah.’

‘Why did you take the responsibility of allowing him to enter? You keep silent! Do you want me to take you to the torture chambers?’

‘No, O, Maharajah. Salya told me it was a sacred duty to perform what he had ordered. I need not do anything but open the gate for him if he so wanted, O, Maharajah, and the gods would reward me. And the lawful Maharajah would reward me with a high post in the army.’

‘Who is the lawful Maharajah?’

‘He who will be anointed by the priests, Mighty Maharajah.’

‘Who?’ Again, the soldier kept silent, cowed down, but on Ashoka’s repeated question: ‘Who?’ he acknowledged: ‘The Crown Prince ... when he returns,’

‘Have him carried off and executed tomorrow in front of the entire troop. Bring Anu here, Satyavat. What do you think of it, Sagka? Let the people know there will be no mercy for any traitor.’

‘There are already five people imprisoned who were all influenced by that wretched penitent, O, Maharajah. I would have taken him in long ago were it not for Girika, who told me to wait for your orders.’

‘Do you know the penitent, Sagka?’

‘No, Sire.’

‘If you were to imprison him now, my informants would miss their most important contact.’

‘What news do you bring, honourable Anu?’

‘Sire, Salya informed Ashavita that the Ganga gate was safe and that now the next thing was to bribe Satyavat. Included in the price was a government post in Bosambali.’

‘Keep a sharp eye on the North gate at the Ganga, but let the watch be as it is. Inform Maskarin about what has happened here but let Salya go on his way. There is more advantage to be gained through him. You, Satyavat, may soon hear more from Ashavita. There comes some light.’

The following morning, Ashoka went for the first time to the army camp. When he approached, the big gong which was sounded for the Maharajah, made itself heard in the various departments of the camp. The elephant ambled between the widely spaced rows of warriors who came to pay their respects to the new Maharajah. Ashoka raised his right hand in greeting and looked somewhat restlessly at the warriors. The success of his taking over of power would depend on them. Sela knew what went on in the mind of his Liege. When they reached the square with its Shiva temple and Ashoka, on his royal elephant, was in front of the building, Sela jumped from his horse, climbed the stage next to the temple from which the priest used to speak to the warriors, and raised his hand.

‘Warriors of India!’ Silence fell on the densely packed crowd; the monsoon drove Sela’s deep voice to every corner of the temple grounds. ‘Warriors of India. Some years ago, the army camp of our beloved Maharajah Bindusara lost a friend who was dear to us all. He himself asked his soldiers, his comrades, whether you would receive him as a friend or a stranger, if he were to come back one day. Whereupon the surroundings resounded with your thundering call: ‘As a friend!’ Now he stands again before you. Say now if you thank Shiva for his return.’

Like a screaming cyclone in *Aashad*², followed by thunder, the name raced over the camps: ‘Shiva!’ and all bowed.

‘Now, say if you rejoice in the new Maharajah!’

Even more fiercely than before, welling up straight from the hearts of the thousands of moved soldiers, unstoppable, their shouts echoed: ‘Hail

Ashoka!’ At last Sela raised his hand.

‘Now, say that you are his warriors, until death!’

A wild excitement took hold of everyone.

‘Until death!’ the cries of jubilation flowed through the rows.

Ashoka was deeply moved. He climbed out of the howdah and with a single leap from the elephant, he stood beside Sela. There seemed to be no end to the cheering. Sela walked down the steps and sent up the bearer of the imperial parasol, while four chamaras waved a cool breeze over the young Maharajah. Ashoka raised his hand and again all sounds ceased immediately. His voice resounded, steady and resonant, over their heads:

‘My friends! You for me. I for all of India! One in labour, one in justice, one in truth! For the happiness of the whole empire!’

A wild cheer followed: ‘Hail Ashoka!’

The Maharajah now came down the steps, climbed the elephant again and rode around the field, holding aloft his chakra. He knew that the bond between him and the army had been renewed and was as profound as before.

The activities of the Maharajah increased. Only a few Rajas and rajukas of the many tributary provinces came to the capital to pledge their fealty, however strange they found it that it did not happen at the consecration ceremony. The foreigners department of the City council had no problem in providing them with lodgings, since most of the governors thought it more prudent not to be in haste. What if later on Sumana became the Maharajah! Ashoka continued imperturbably with his activities, led the Council of Ministers, kept the work at the departments going, received informants from within and outside the City, and discussed the interests of the great empire. He did not neglect the imperial family and in important affairs he performed the administration of justice himself. When night fell, the spies came to report at his working quarters and informed him about all that was taking place in every part of his empire. One night Girika appeared; he had difficulty walking.

‘Sire, I come from the other side of the Ganga, where the henchmen of Salya had dragged me along. It is the perilous part of a spy’s work.’

‘Tell me your experiences, Girika. Do you know more about Salya?’

‘After his visit to the park, I did not let him go anywhere without being followed but the shrewd penitent must have realised that I was shadowing him and thus hindering him in his activities. Yesterday, at night, he lured me to a place on the Ganga, where some of his henchmen suddenly waylaid me and after a fierce struggle, tied me up. A young spy, who usually stays close to me, straightaway gathered some men, but Salya’s friends brought me swiftly to the other side of the Ganga. When the others arrived Salya’s men left me and fled. Because I had been wounded, my friend brought me to the hermitage of the holy Sayana. There I was taken care of and had long talks about my work with the holy Sayana. We grew more and more convinced that there must be a close connection between Salya, the Brahmin-court, at least with Ashavita, and with the traitors in the army, particularly with the departments which are in the capital. And now Maskarin and I think we can throw light on the matter. A dozen spies have been investigating the comings and goings of the penitent.’

‘Let us hear, Girika.’

After Girika had revealed his plans to the Maharajah, it was decided that he, Girika, would be taken on as soon as possible as one of Sagka’s guards at the Ganga gate.



THE DECISION OF THE GODS

Sumana's army proceeded but, being poorly commanded, rather clumsily and with frequent halts. The continuous sacrificial oblations, the care of their divine highnesses, the king and his queen, took much of their time and labour because, after the gods, all attention was centred on the Maharajah-to-be. He did not take part in the discussions; for the sake of prudence he was kept out of decision-making. Everyone had faith that assistance would come from the gods, in which way they would help only a few knew for to hope to achieve victory through vanquishing the army of Ashoka was foolishness; that the priests knew as well as the army commanders. Their faith was based on a secret which gave them far more assurance than the most powerful army. Thus was the decision of the priests, thus the decision of the gods. Aradi controlled her weak-willed king; she also knew the decision of the gods and was so convinced that Sumana would soon become the Maharajah, that in spite of her pregnancy she did not wish to stay behind in Taxila to await the end of the battle. Dressed in a beautiful gown of Kashi muslin with a peacock-blue cloak, embroidered with gold thread, she rode on the luxuriantly decorated howdah on the imperial elephant. Everyone knew: the gods, unseen, were accompanying the army and enjoying the offerings under the sway of the priests. A sudden attack by the Bhils on the army's equipage brought about great confusion to the

ponderous march of the army. When at last Sumana's cavalry was ready for the counter-attack the desert riders disappeared on their swift Baramer¹ horses into the jungle. It took a few days before everything could be reorganised and all sections of the army could continue on their orderly march. But at a distance of a day's travel from Vrindavana, a body of trained Rajputans with loud battle-cries attacked the foot soldiers of Sumana, splitting them up and scattering them to different sides. Only when the war-chariots, the cavalry and the high howdahs of the elephants came into sight did the Rajputans retreat, as orderly and controlled as their irrepressible attack. They had rushed away along the jungle roads and Sumana was convinced that they feared a confrontation. It was in this way that the sedate march of the army was continuously disrupted and all were happy to reach the Yamuna at last. Whatever could be got hold of—ships, rafts, boats—were taken to the ferry at Atavi to transport the army to the other side of the river. Then the desert tribes would not be able to attack them anymore.

The camp was set-up at some distance from the river and to offer thanksgiving to the gods for their help, a huge sacrificial ceremony was conducted by the priests. The following morning they would start crossing the river, after a brief early morning-offering ritual. Only a few guard-posts were set-up, at the river and on the boats, for security. When it seemed as if the night transformed the jungle into an impenetrable embankment and the silvery waves of the wide Yamuna dissolved more and more into the half-dark of the Indian night, the two watchers at the ferry saw the flickering glimmer of the sacrificial fires rising above the trees.

'May the gods accept the offerings, Puru. We need their help! In the last few days the march was going well. Indra has protected the Raja against the ungodly desert demons.'

'Ashoka is a dangerous opponent. I fear we face a serious battle in Pataliputra.'

'The priests are confident, Puru.'

'But I am afraid the gods will arrive befuddled from all these soma sacrifices and snooze away their time.'

'Do not say such sacrilegious things, Puru. They offend the gods!'

'If only we could have stayed in Pataliputra.'

'Keep silent, wretch, if you do not wish to be killed as a traitor!'

‘We will be killed anyway. Is this an army of warriors? It looks more like a temple ceremony: offerings, offerings, offerings. And the wild desert tribes harass us as if we were a merchant caravan. On the orders of Ashoka, of course! In Pataliputra, we will light a fire against Ashoka! Defend, defend! Ashoka would have destroyed or surrounded those Bhils much earlier as he did before with the Takkas.’

‘Yes, yes, stop it, will you.’

‘And then the twelve priests in whose presence we are not allowed; their tents and their chariots are too holy for us. Which army keeps such a foolish watch for the gods! They sit in the front at each offering. They never take part, keep silent, their feet on the holy *kusha* grass, as if they are kin to Indra and Agni. The Brahmin council always stands between them and us so that we should not touch them. Ashoka used to say: keep your army strong, be alert, keep your weapons at the ready, exercise for the battle – that is the greatest offering! These fools prefer to leave the battle to the gods while they themselves kneel down in front of the holy fires. For what purpose do we need our weapons then, Bali? We limp to Pataliputra, that is to say, if the Bhils and the Rajputans permit us to. Bah!’

That very moment one of the attendants came with some chunks of meat and some wine. Puru and Bali drank and ate.

‘Those are Brahmins! A drink is forbidden! Ashoka would never give liquor to his guards.’

‘It gives courage. Besides, before us and behind us is the jungle, on our left is the river, on our right the road to the army camp. We might as well sleep. The night is long and the gods will protect us anyway.’

‘Except Shiva ... who is in Pataliputra.’

‘You mean Ashoka?’

‘I do not know what I mean but Ashoka is a great warrior and our army commanders are priest-cronies.’

‘Keep silent, desecrator!’

‘Keep silent? Yes, we will be silenced soon when we are the sacrifice! We have a king who is ruled by women and priests! Bindusara and Chandragupta were governors of their empire and their armies. Ashoka too, Bali!’

‘Then offer your service to Ashoka. Do you hear the jackals in the jungle? Cowardly traitors are reborn as jackals.’

‘That’s impossible. Jackals are true to their kings, the lions. Ssht, I keep my arrow at the ready, else we will be their prey.’ Once more the calls cackled through the night-covered woods. They came closer.

‘Let us pray to Shiva. Maybe, he will be more favourable to the Raja.’

Both sank down to their knees, stretched out their arms as if towards Mount Meru, bowed in the dust and prayed long and earnestly.

‘Indra ... have mercy! Look, Bali ... the ships!’ Suddenly, the entire fleet seemed to have begun moving in the silence of the night. It sailed soundlessly to the middle of the river.

‘Merciful gods!’ Bali ... the wanted to rush to the guard-house to warn the others but both were taken by surprise. They were gagged and their arms and legs tied. Powerless they watched as all the ships sailed away and vanished soundlessly.

While Sumana’s army wrestled with a thousand setbacks, Ashoka’s cavalry sped along the wide roads of his empire, carrying with them the reports of the spies who were probing everywhere to find out what stand the local provincial rulers took in the struggle between the brothers. Where they feared danger, a strong army force appeared, and blocked all help intended for Sumana. Ashoka was kept well-informed about the strength of Sumana’s army. It was being calculated as to when it would arrive in the capital. The gates and the walls were fortified, the warriors trained daily, though the Maharajah knew that the effectiveness of Sumana’s army was directed more towards the gods than on the armed force. One thing worried the Maharajah: Shakuni and Sunasepha and their influence on the people even on some sections of the army. The mysteriousness which surrounded it disturbed him especially. The sentence of Chandaka and his cronies did even now worry him.

A few cavalry-men of Sagka were imprisoned but Shakuni could not be found. Salya roamed around the streets as a penitent, and nobody was refusing him entry into their houses.

At the King’s Road a fruit vendor loudly offered his goods. When he saw Salya, he walked towards him.

‘Look here, holy Salya, take this fruit from me. No, wait, this one is the best that I have.’

‘The gods will bless you, vendor.’

‘Thank you, Salya, do you want another one?’

‘If I eat all, you do not take the income home.’

‘Sir, what I offer to the holy penitent, I offer to the gods.’

‘They will bless you.’ Salya asked him about his family and his life. The vendor took in keenly the person, the voice, the bearing of the penitent. The next day, Salya met a baker, selling cakes. He offered Salya the very best of the cakes that he had in his basket. With him, too, Salya began a talk.

‘Do not give away too much, baker,’ the penitent spoke after he had eaten the last part of it.

‘Sir, as long as I am able to bake, no holy man will ask for a cake from me in vain.’

‘The gods will bless you. Too many forget these days their sacred duties of generosity, hospitality and submission to the priests of Brahma.’

‘May he who fails to do so suffer for it in the next incarnation!’

Meanwhile, he studied the priest carefully.

Then, on a certain day, there appeared a second Salya in the streets of Pataliputra who looked as much like the other one, as one lotus leaf is like another. In clothing and posture, in the wild hair and beard, in voice and in gesture and even in facial expressions, there was hardly any difference. The second one was, in body and spirit, an exact copy of the first Salya. He moved freely in the bustle of the market, strolled around the quays, entered into the houses if he was asked to, just like the first Salya. All secrets of the first Salya seemed to be his as well, all betrayers of the Maharajah his friends, just like his look-alike. Where the first one walked in, his duplicate dared as well; the only thing he zealously avoided was an encounter with the first one.

It happened one day, when he stayed with a Vaishya’s family, that the head of the family entered and for a while gazed at him terror-struck.

‘Sir, I see you here but ... a moment ago I spoke to you on the King’s Road.’

‘Keep silent! Do you not know that I can divide myself by my karma into as many Salyas as I choose! Do not talk about it ... priests are not safe in Pataliputra. Do your duty and keep silent! Deal with our business and for the rest keep silent! Is there anything for me to know yet?’

‘Sunī predicts that the new Maharajah will be anointed within two months. The people will welcome and protect the new Maharajah and there

will be great festivities and celebrations.’

‘Where did you speak to Suni?’

‘In the Brahma temple, sir.’

‘Yes, yes ...’

Salya continued on his walk. That night he chose to sleep at the northern Ganga Gate. When Kampaka, a new guard appeared, he stumbled over the legs of ‘Salya’. The penitent got up, swore and cursed the poor soldier. Kampaka went back to the guardhouse in deep dismay.

‘What is the matter, Kampaka?’

‘Salya cursed me! A terrible calamity awaits me!’

‘That silly penitent? I do not trust him.’

Kampaka burst into tears. One mocked him, another pitied him, but Kampaka was inconsolable. Simha left the guardhouse.

‘Sir, Kampaka! I think he can be won.’

‘Someone who is as awkward as to stumble over me, I curse!’

‘But you did not curse me!’

‘No, you are right but the working of a curse once uttered cannot be undone by a priest.’

‘Reduce it, sir.’

‘What did we do with you?’

‘Sir, you sent me to Suni.’

‘Hmm ... Well. Send Kampaka to Suni, too, and join him yourself. Suni will tell him what penance to do for his sins. Let me sleep now. First, send Kampaka to me.’

The next day, Simha and Kampaka went together to the Brahma temple where Suni, after doing some fortune-telling, took Kampaka into his circle of accomplices and let it be known that it depended on his obedience to Simha, whether he could be forgiven by the gods. Kampaka thought that he recognised Suni from Devaka’s hermitage. The work of the spy became easier. A list of untrustworthy horse guards was soon handed over to Sagka, whereupon Ashoka’s doubts left him. However, he remained most careful. Many kings had paid with their lives for not being careful enough. A strong guard accompanied him on all his trips to the town, to the ramparts, even to the army camps. No one besides Satyavat knew where the Maharajah slept. Usually, he changed his sleeping chambers a few times at night, in spite of reassurances from Satyavat.

Sumana's allies, men, and women of the harem, were under the strictest observation. Nobody was admitted to the Maharajah without being meticulously scrutinised by Sagka and his helpers. Even for a visit to Subhadraangi, Satyavat painstakingly checked first whether there would be any danger for his Master, after all, more kings had become victims by placing too great a trust on the residents of the women quarters. Ashoka always carried along his five sharp chakras; at night, they were within his immediate reach. He felt that constant vigilance was imperative. Would this ever change? Could he one day walk amongst his people, safe, like a holy Brahmin, like Sayana? How could he convince all of them of his good intentions? Could he ever obtain the sympathy of the Brahmin, when he would treat the *mleccha* as a human being, consider the West as being of equal value as the east or could he keep the trust of the Rajputans, Bhils and Takkas, if he took under his protection the brahminical tenets and tolerated the pedantic priests? Why was it necessary that Brahmin and Buddhist, Jain and Ajivika opposed each other as mortal enemies? Could all ever be encompassed in one common humanity?



THE DELICATE BLUE SCARF

‘Sire, Ajamidha, a Brahmin from a hermitage in the Sarayu-valley, desires to speak to you.’

‘Does he have the seal of Satyavat?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Let him enter the audience hall.’

Ashoka dressed himself for the occasion. When he entered the hall, awaiting him was the stranger, a tall and slimly-built priest with long, dark beard, and a veiled woman. Ashoka picked up a chakra.

‘What can I do for the honourable Ajamidha?’

‘I ask nothing, gracious Maharajah. The hermits live quietly and free of care in the empire of the Mauryas, the Vaishyas can do their work and perform their duties, while the craftsmen find buyers for their products, and trade flourishes.’

‘And the Shudras, the Chandalas and the mountain tribes, Ajamidha?’

Ajamidha straightened up.

‘I was not aware that the low-born people enjoyed so much of your interest, Sire. When it goes well with the Aryans, their lives fortunately become less burdensome, too.’

‘Fortunately, you say, honourable Ajamidha!’

‘Very much so, Sire. For us all life comes out of the Atman and thus is sacred. In our hermitage we respect whatever the Atman unfolds.’

‘And the animal of prey that spares no life, holy Ajamidha?’

Again, Ajamidha drew himself up.

‘We try to keep it away from the areas where people live.’

To have it destroy life elsewhere!’

‘He who created the universe,

‘Who looks down upon it from the highest light of heaven,

‘Who made or has not made it,

‘He knows...! Or, does he not know either?’¹

‘Why the Creator has given to the lion and the tiger their unalterable preying instincts ... I do not know.’

‘So, you will accept them. But what about the human being, Sir! When he displays preying or murderous characteristics, what would you do about it? You cannot easily keep him out of your hermitage nor can I from my empire.’

‘For the human being who is gifted his manas, I wish to set goodness against the wickedness, in the hope he will change for his own good.’

‘And if he does not change? There are people who seem to be incurable. A hyena always gets the left overs, the lion the best meat from its prey.’

‘Then one can only pray to the gods that they will guide the tendencies of these people towards the good.’

‘I would consider myself a bad Maharajah if I depended on prayers to chase away evil from my empire. For the rulers it is the law that counts and punishment and power, which I will use in whatever way I think it should. Who gave me the discernment? Shiva, god of life and of death.’

‘I would not dare to intervene in the affairs of the Maharajah, Sire, nor attempt to interpret the laws that rule your countries. An empire is not a hermitage; yet in both, it is the human spirit that rules. I have heard much about our new Maharajah; I am not unconcerned about who reigns over Aryavarta. I know an unbending will characterises his personality and an enormous power is entrusted in his hands. But the question of how he would handle that power filled me day and night with great concern. It was my conviction that only one person could be allowed to govern Aryavarta; it is said, Sire, that he is quick and just, but hard in his decisions; that his

hardness and justness spares no one, neither Brahmin nor Chandala. In my hermitage justice is mellowed by friendliness, punishment determined by understanding, hardness steered by compassion in the right direction. My wife, who has been taken by Yama long ago to better places, we hope, understood only one rule: the all-encompassing love against the cold-heartedness of the world. My only daughter has taken over the domain of our home, with—to my inexpressible joy—her mother’s love. Asandhimitra is beautiful, Sire. Many a high guest on the hunt in the jungle, whom I have had the honour to receive in my hermitage, begged me for her hand. I refused because I thought that her heart, formed by peace, benign love, and empathy, could only find happiness with a man of similar disposition. Then one night, I dreamt that Shiva with his third eye was overlooking all India in rage, because each being was only serving his own interests and did not know peace, love, or compassion. The people chastised brutally, and did not spare the lives of others, who had as much right to live as them. Shiva wished to dispense death and life himself. His eye threw out its fiery rays at the endless jungle of your empire and set afire the dried-out plants, so that the flames reared their tongues high up into the sky. It was feared that India would change into the scorched, bare rocks on the Meru. Then suddenly a lovely figure appeared; it was Parvati. She poured over Shiva’s infuriated head the cool blessed water of the Ganga that comes down from the heavens, and tied a delicate blue scarf of fragrant silk around his forehead and over his radiating eye. Thus, she tempered the eye of the mighty god to a cautious and friendly disposition. For days I pondered about the meaning of this vivid dream, gracious Maharajah, and I could find only one explanation: That one should not follow one’s personal happiness, but humanity’s mission in this life between two eternities. So, I offer you my daughter as your Rani.’

Ajamidha now removed the veil which had fully enveloped Asandhimitra and led her to the young Raja. Ashoka was deeply touched by the pure beauty of the youthful Brahmin girl. The lovely lines of her body, browned by the sun and jungle air, were silhouetted like an ethereal figure beneath the gossamer thin, white fabric of her simple muslin clothes. In her black hair shone a big moonstone of pure splendour, and on her bosom a piece of radiating dark red jade in a silvery setting, shaped like a lotus. Asandhimitra had ingenuously raised her large eyes towards him. When

Ashoka, inadvertently, became transfixed by the unusualness of her appearance, she lowered her eyes.

‘Highly revered Ajamidha, only gratitude remains in me for your wise insight and self-sacrificing attitude. Permit me, however, to ask Asandhimitra two questions: Do I not break, by accepting Ajamidha’s offer, a mutual love, which has more rights than this?’

‘No, Sire, as yet I have not given my love to anyone,’ Asandhimitra’s clear, rich voice sang melodiously.

‘And do you wish to bind yourself to my life, now that you have seen me? Here, Asandhimitra, my rough hand! Look at my face; Sumana’s mother, Gopali, who hated me, was not the only one to call it rough. I cannot bear that my Rani should hate me for what the gods have meant for me to have!’

‘Sire, a woman loves the outward man only for his inner being.’

‘You do not know that yet.’

‘Father’s greatest friend is the holy Sayana, whose words find confirmation in your eyes, Sire.’

Ashoka looked at her with a searching look ... Madri ... Devi ...

‘So, you wish to become a Rani in my harem?’ he said at last.

‘Father thinks it is a command of the gods. I wish it only if I can soothe the gaze of the mighty Maharajah to prudence and friendliness. And you permit, Sire, that I learn to love you.’

Asandhimitra’s earnestness and dignity touched the Maharajah even more than her beauty. He immediately had the most beautifully situated rooms in the ladies’ quarters prepared for her. He then allowed her to be presented to his mother, Subhadrangi.

Then, like a poisonous tick that crawls out of the lotus flower in a vase, distrust suddenly raised its head: Could it be betrayal in its most beautiful guise? As soon as the thought flickered in his mind, he took precautions: Rohini was appointed as the temporary servant to the Rani-to-be, Satyavat was given orders for her security; Girika sent, at Ashoka’s order, a capable spy as a pilgrim to the hermitage, to find out the true intentions of Ajamidha.

Meanwhile, news about Sumana’s army arrived regularly. Ashoka knew the troops were not a serious match for him but he knew, too, that the Council of priests would never give up. The gods were with them, over

whom even an Ashoka could not prevail! The Maharajah understood, it would turn into a struggle between brother and brother. But he could not understand the stupidity of Sumana's council who thought of going to war against him with a worthless army. He preferred to see them as rebels; then he need not take into account difficult considerations. Every time he thought of seizing his mighty weapon, the army, which was dedicated to him, the image of his friends appeared in his mind's eye: Sayana, Kullika, Khallataka. None of them would approve, even worse. And was not he, in spite of his great power, dependent on them? And was it not his love for Bindusara as well, that just like theirs, stood in the way of befitting measures? But then what? Chandaka had experienced what it meant to be up against him. Did Sumana and his other four brothers deserve any better? Tolerate them perhaps, he could, but meeting them hidden in the darkness in front of him was something he did not wish. What would Asandhimitra say? She was not prejudiced, influenced neither by him nor by Sumana. Of course, she would say: Don't kill! He knew that kind. Yet, his indecisiveness about Sumana drove him towards her. Immediately he sent a message to Satyavat that he wished to see Asandhimitra. After a thorough investigation, Satyavat informed him that everything was safe.

'Beautiful Asandhimitra, you come from a hermitage where peace and friendliness reign. Do you know of the world in which you are living right now?'

'I heard something about it from your mother, Subhadra, O Maharajah. It worries me deeply ...'

'Was it vanity that drove you to Pataliputra?'

Startled, Asandhimitra looked up at the Emperor.

'Vanity, you say, O, Mighty Maharajah? My lovely hermitage in the jungle beside the murmuring Sarayu, where I love every living being: the kokila in the tree, the deer at the creek. Where everything strives towards unity with the eternal Atman.

*One is the fire that so frequently flames up,
One is the sun, radiating the earth,
The one morning sky, red, shines above all,
One, is this too which became all ...²*

‘Here, if I may believe your Mother, everyone strives for power, so for disunity, so for enmity. My Father, true as the white Meru, did not keep you uninformed of the reasons for which he let me go to Pataliputra. It must be my ignorance, O, Maharajah! Before my talk with Subhadrangi, I had not been fully aware that here, at your court, the events of a world empire are conducted, decisions are made about the death or wellbeing of thousands of people and animals; messages and orders are going out and coming in from far away countries, about which I had not even dreamt. I, from whom some influence could reach out to the mightiest Maharajah, feel as a child of two in your Council of high ministers, where you introduced me yesterday. Send me back, Sire, to where I may make at least a few beings happy ... if you think that it is vanity that drove me.’

‘When you wish to return to your father’s hermitage, beautiful Asandhimitra, I shall by no means stop you. But Mother Subhadrangi views it wrongly. A child has no judgement, no goal, no experience. But you represent a principle for which you desired to offer your beautiful life, Asandhimitra; and a principle, that, in the end, should count as the highest that a human being can reach.’

Asandhimitra looked at him; a happy smile broke through, like a beam of sun upon the hazy splendour of flowers in the dark jungle in Vasanth. Ashoka was charmed.

‘Father’s imagination of life in the capital may have been a little too simple.’

‘Your Father has, with the wisdom of a sage, sensed what is lacking in the heart of the empire and in a young Maharajah.’

‘A child learns to walk only slowly, Sire; a Brahmacharin has to struggle through a learning period of many years before he is introduced to the sacred doctrine. How then can one expect from a gracious Maharajah, in the first year on his exalted throne, to reach the highest step of wisdom!’

‘That is wise thought, Asandhimitra. I would like to hear your views which as yet are not prejudiced. Listen ...’ And Ashoka told her the story of his life, his years with his guru Kullika, Sumana’s opposition and his repeated attempts to kill him, his own work in the north and the south-west of the empire and his seizing of power.

‘Now, Sumana is nearing the capital with an army that may not be small in numbers but is weak in its fighting spirit. It is led by a council of

Brahmins who are convinced that the gods will come to their help and so they will defeat me. I have the power and I feel inclined to sweep him away from Aryavarta's soil together with his ministers and army and all. My army is capable of destroying his completely and in no time. What shall I do?'

Asandhimitra listened with rapt attention.

'It is better that he for the fourth time should attempt to kill you, you who are mighty and warned, than that you should as the first one make an attempt on his life, O, Maharajah.' This appreciation of his war-strategy struck Ashoka unpleasantly.

'He commits an attack on the country!'

'But that is what you can prevent, you are the mightiest one. Remember: five sons of Bindusara, and Aradi ... pregnant ...'

'And what, when they lose their mad war?'

'Try to convince them that they are committing a silly folly.'

'Do you think they will then withdraw meekly, Asandhimitra? They think they have the support of the gods and view that as being mightier than the mightiest army.'

'All gods, except Shiva.'

'Maybe, except Shiva. But they will not be deterred nor withdraw.'

'You cannot leave it untried, O, Maharajah. You are now the Emperor of your foes as well as of your friends, like Brihaspati is god over the Brahmins as well as Chandalas, the tiger as well as the lamb. Are you not threatened by a danger, you are not aware of as yet, Sire?'

That night, the Maharajah held a Council of the Ministers at which Sayana was also present. Ashoka explained how the situation was developing.

'May I first hear the opinion of our youngest minister, Radhagupta?'

'I greatly thank the gracious Maharajah, who wishes to hear my opinion before the more experienced and wise men have given their more valuable opinion. The way I see it is that only a speedy and instant attack can avert all danger. Merely by returning to Pataliputra, Sunasepha and Shakuni already deserve death, based on Bindusara's sentence. The Brahmin-court has to be cleared up tomorrow in the harshest way, just like the cavalry has to be cleared of any suspect element. You cannot tolerate high treason in your empire. The army has to encounter Sumana's, and if necessary, destroy

it. Only then will the Maharajah be safe, his government established, and the country return to orderliness.'

'May I set against this what the honourable Sayana thinks?'

'My friend Piyadasi has always shown how he is able to enforce his plans without a war. Why should he now destroy a whole army, why kill the sons of his father! Does one let the jungle-fire burn when one can save the woods? Does one let the fields dry out and let the Vaishyas languish when Surya blazes his fiery rays? Or, drown the herd when the Ganga swells into a wild sea? The human being has his heart, his manas. Brihaspati expects from the Maharajah more sensible wisdom, since he granted him, through his manas, infinite power, and thus greater responsibility, for Aryan and Mletcha. No one of us wishes Sumana to be the Maharajah, but that does not mean that our sword has to wipe him out and his people. They, too, are revelations of the Atman, just like us. I expect Pyadasi to take different measures.'

'I want law and justice, my Sayana.'

'But a higher law than manslaughter or the killing of brothers.'

'And you, my Khallataka?'

'Send a delegation to Kashi, Sire, and offer Sumana the position of the Viceroy of Takshasila or Ujjain, to prevent bloodshed.'

'In the West, the viceroys have already been appointed. Moreover, I consider Raja Sumana unsuitable to be a governor. A place to live and money in accordance with his status, more I cannot offer him.'

'Then offer him that as ultimate, gracious Maharajah.'

'The next morning, the ministers Aruna and Kala left for Kashi. They were received in a meeting of Sumana and his brothers, the council, and the army commanders. When Aruna conveyed Ashoka's message, it aroused great indignation. The Rani spoke first:

'Tell your lord, high ministers, that the Crown Prince does not wish to discuss his rights. The gods are with us. As the oldest son of the deceased Maharajah, Raja Sumana, requests Prince Ashoka to leave Pataliputra immediately.'

'May I request the high Raja to validate these decisions?'

'I do not negotiate with the envoys of a throne-thief and insurgent.'

Both ministers stood up.

‘I only wish to warn you that Ashoka’s army is combative, heavily armed and vigorously trained.’

Sumana’s minister answered: ‘Maybe, the army in the capital is strong but the gods will fight on our side, where the law is.’

‘I feel sorry that I can give the high Raja little hope.’

Everyone kept silent. To Aruna the silence seemed almost painful.

‘I request now, O, Raja, to be permitted to return to Pataliputra.’

Sumana did not move; the first minister only nodded. The two ministers left after this serious insult and travelled as quickly as possible to Pataliputra.

The same day a great offering ceremony was performed in Kashi and the following morning, they started to cross the Ganga, whereupon the Bhils and Rajputans resumed their fake attacks and troubled again the marching army. There was only one thing they looked after with the most sublime perfection: the offering ceremony. Not a single mistake was made in the chanting of mantras and the samhitas were recited with the exact tonality, which would impel the gods to do what they asked. That the mountain tribes were not able to do anything against the prayers of the priests was clear. The slightest resistance and they were driven away. Unconcerned, Sumana’s army went on. Soon, the gates of Pataliputra would open up for the rightful Maharajah. That was how it was foretold to him. The people would cheer him. So, the priests wished it and thus the gods. Everyone knew that there was a direct connection with the gods: there were the twelve men in the finest priests’ garb, who would defend them against the most dangerous violence. They spoke with no one; during the offering ceremony they were seated as silent witnesses, in the first row, and with their feet on the kusha-grass. Madhava, a fanatical priest of the Brahmin-court was their leader and accompanied them day and night. They were treated with the highest respect even by the high Council of the Raja. More the soldiers did not know about them and neither did Ashoka’s spies.

As irresponsible as Sumana’s command was, as timely and strong was Ashoka’s. The only problem was, however, that his opponents might commit the folly of an attack, propelled by their naïve belief. Asandhimitra, though, was afraid of the twelve priests, about whom Ashoka’s informants had spoken. Ashoka thought that women placed too great a value on the mysterious ceremonies of the priests. Daily the Maharajah discussed with

Sayana and Khallataka how the battle between brothers could be avoided. Ashoka feared that nothing could move the pedantic counsellors of the stupid Raja, to give up their path of folly and destruction. Or, was there a secret that he could not solve as yet? After all, neither bravery nor skill could save them! They had to know that themselves, too. What was there then?



THE OTHER SALYA

Salya had been worried for a long time about the other penitent who was roaming around in Pataliputra, using his name, dressing up like him and imitating his voice, who made his appearance amongst the people, just like he did. He himself often expressed the view that the Brahmin-court would never anoint the new Maharajah. According to rumours, Ashoka had once in a rage killed three Brahmins amongst whom was the chief of the Brahmin-court. ‘Richika?’ startled, people had wanted to know. In reply, Salya had shrugged his shoulders but his face seemed to imply confirmation. The new Salya shared the secrets of the first one and made common cause with the opponents of Ashoka. Yet, scared as he was, Salya did not dare to meet his look-alike whom he had never seen closely in public for discovery would mean his death. Ashoka would not hesitate to dispatch him the same way he had Chandaka.

The new Salya strolled along the King’s Road deep in thought: How could he attain his goal? He appeared to be indifferent to what was happening around him. Timidly and with respect, everyone gave way to the person who was considered to be a great and holy man. Evidently, his karma allowed him to perform terrifying wonders! Sagka’s cavalry-men pulled on their reins when he was crossing the road. Vendors offered him their fruits or sweetmeats; but this day he did not even deign to look at

them. Only when they had to give him what appeared to be a message, did he stop to speak. Sometimes, a Vaishya or a Kshatriya, dressed inconspicuously, walked up to him, whispered a few words in his ear and disappeared as fast as he had come.

Suni ... Shakuni ... Maybe, Kampaka was right. He had to find out but how? Risk showing up at the tiger-rock? Could Suni be deceived? The guard of the temple? Kampaka had described the temple carefully to him but a casual visit was too dangerous. He would have to wait.

A young priest who had been following him for some time approached somewhat hesitantly.

‘Sire, Suni wishes to talk to you.’ He was startled and thought for a while.

‘Tonight ... not earlier ... I am shadowed,’ Salya whispered, cautiously looking around. ‘Towards dusk!’

Was it a trap? Quietly, he considered what he should—could—do. It was too risky! Suni knew the real Salya thoroughly. Was it possible to mislead him? But the opportunity was too tempting. Only one thing was possible if it failed, seize him. But he had to try, however small the chance of success to play the real Salya so well that even Suni would not notice. First taking care of his safety! The young priest had long since disappeared out of sight. He gave a sign, and a moment later, a young man joined him.

‘Imprison Salya instantly and keep him locked up until the second *kalakramein* of the night. Send towards dusk a strong guard in and around the Brahma-temple.’

Salya entered the temple as dusk fell. The dim light would be of help to him. In front of and inside the temple some devotees were prostrating, seemingly in deep prayer. He strode straightaway to the secret room of the priest. His bearing showed strong excitement, his voice fear.

‘Where is Suni? Quick!’ he demanded hoarsely. He was brought to the fortune-teller. ‘All is betrayed, Shakuni.’ He saw right away that it was Devaka’s helper before him. ‘The spies of the Shudra recognised me! If the Crown Prince does not come quickly, Ashoka will drown us in the Ganga or fling a chakra at our throats! A moment ago the other Salya was imprisoned. Evidently, they were looking for me!’

‘The wretch! Then he serves some purpose yet!’

‘And if the throne thieves have me and you are imprisoned?’

‘Why did you not have him disappear?’

‘Impossible, everyone believes he is my other self. I myself have admitted it in agreement with you yourself!’

‘You are right, Sunasepha.’

In spite of growing excitement, Salya concealed his joy over this name. ‘What have you to tell me?’

‘I heard that two ministers, Aruna and Kala, are on their way to Prince Sumana to negotiate with him. I have to know what will be said there. Try to find out what is being said from Ashavita.’

‘Do you not fear betrayal?’

‘No fear. Sumana himself does not even know the purpose of the twelve priests in his army. Madhava can be fully trusted and Labha has made real *sramanas*¹ of the twelve warriors here. The Shudra shall not dare to violate their priestly garb in the battle. And were it to fail there, well, inside the Ganga gate they certainly will not surmise evil intentions under the cloaks of the sramanas. Twenty-four chances which mean certainty, Sunasepha. The Shudra has but one life! And once the Shudra has gone, the way is open for the Crown Prince. Nobody will oppose his succession anymore.’

‘Yet, only one has to lose his courage!’ Sweat was dripping from Salya’s rough face.

‘That is well taken care of. Their deed is declared sacred through offering upon offering. Any manner of hesitation will cost them their lives. That they know! If they succeed then a great worldly bounty awaits them. They are all well trained and fanatical warriors!’

‘But you! The army! I! I am no longer safe in the streets of Pataliputra!’

‘Well ...’ Shakuni’s features hardened, showing a fanatical fury. ‘Does Sunasepha from cowardliness fear for his life? Then have a lucky escape! You were successful before! What does it matter whether you or I or the army goes under. If only the Shudra falls! Then the gods and our varna are saved!’

Salya stood up. ‘You will hear from me tomorrow. If I am not resting on the waves of the Ganga. Pray for my poor soul, Shakuni.’

‘Our varna demands any sacrifice, be it your life or mine!’

‘Salya’ sped to the palace. The problem was solved. He will deal with Salya tomorrow, at the market square, amidst all the people of Pataliputra! That had to be done for his Lord!

The following morning he found the real Salya at the market. There, the penitent forecast the future to his listeners, amongst whom were several helpers of Maskarin. He foretold hard times when battles would rage, and warned the people to adopt the right attitude and not provoke the gods' ill-favour. The other Salya forced his way through the spectators, who got upset and gave way, so he could place himself in front of the priest and look at him for a while. Many of the onlookers shivered to behold this uncanny resemblance of the two penitents.

'Who are you, penitent?' he asked at last.

'Salya. And you?'

'Salya! I am pleased to meet you, Salya.' From every side, curious people drew near. 'My memory is bad. Where did I separate myself from you? Yes, yes, I am your second self. You forced me by your strong religious power, to depart for Pataliputra. Is that not so, Salya?'

'For sure, Salya. Come, let us go on.'

'Why such haste! When did you decide to send me to the capital? Did you not wish to go yourself? Or, was it not permitted? Come on, tell us, Salya! Life is tedious here for me. I wish to return to the jungle, to the hermitage. Give account to me why you forced me to come to live this restless life, harming our karma. What was your name again, Salya, when you were doing penance in the jungle?'

'That does not matter, Salya, come!' The penitent was evidently upset but the other one kept himself no less excited.

'First, I have to know your name and mine! I cannot find my self again! I walk here between the people, unborn, of no mother. Who are you and who am I? Where did you live? In the jungle?'

'Yes, near the Terai.'

'How long were you a penitent, Salya, before you sent me off?'

'For a thousand years I kept to the strict ascetic's life in the jungle.'

'Agreed, agreed, Salya. Now I do remember. You were living there with three other penitents. I cannot recollect their names! What were their names? Help me! As you have sent me off with such a poor memory you have to tell me their names.'

'I have shared the hermitage with many penitents.'

'Yes, yes, but the last three great penitents. You remember: there came a Prince, a Prince, Salya! A beautiful young Prince!'

‘No, beautiful he was not.’

‘Yes, they locked up the Prince inside a shed, a cowshed with high palisades. And then they wanted the murderers to come and kill him. Kill a Maurya Prince, Salya! What were the names of those murderers? Do you remember, Salya?’

Salya could not utter a word but his look-alike went on:

‘Was not his name, Richika? Yes, Richika. He had been the chief of the Brahmin-court. We were there too, Salya, were not we? You were me and I was you. Do you remember the other two?’ He turned to the crowd. ‘Keep quiet for a moment, friends.’

‘Yes, now it is becoming clear again. Devaka and Tritsus, exiled from Magadha, the knaves, by the holy Maharajah Bindusara. Because they had attempted to kill Prince ... Prince Ashoka. Prince Ashoka was locked in by Shakuni in that cowshed, together with Ratnaka, the great physician, who was later tortured to death by Chandaka. Prince Ashoka and Ratnaka, though, did not allow themselves to be killed! They ordered the priests to set them free. Was that not so, Salya? But Devaka knew that Prince Sumana would soon arrive with the murderers. Then Shiva had punished them, killed them with his chakra. I feel so happy, Salya, I remember everything again! And now you and I, Salya. Who was I, who were you? What was my name, what was yours? We were one, were we not, one priest!

‘Salya ...’ Sunasepha stammered, aghast.

‘Salya? No, no, we were ... Listen.’ His look-alike lowered his head, appeared to be thinking deeply, searching for some name. The onlookers listened in excitement and suspense. Some shivered with fear, others had turned pale upon witnessing the magic in front of their eyes. Salya tried to elude the other man’s grip but the two were hemmed in by a thickly-packed throng of curious people. Maskarin’s helpers, at his orders, let no one get through.

‘Come on, Salya, we shall return to the jungle!’ Sunasepha tried to free himself from the circle, but the other Salya did not let go.

‘Just a moment yet, Salya. Who are we, you and I? Who was that priest who dissolved into two beings and two minds? Every person is two: a good and a bad one, but joined. Why do we have to live, divided, in this wretched city? What is your name?’

‘Salya. And now I leave. Follow me!’

‘Ha, Salya, now I do recognise us again. You, and ... I are Sunasepha. Were we not for ever exiled from this city by the holy Maharajah Bindusara? Away to the jungle! If Prince Ashoka finds us here he will throw us into the Ganga, the most grave sentence for a priest! We are lost! We wanted to have him killed! Let us go, let us go to the jungle! Where is Shakuni? He called for the murderers from Pataliputra, he was freed by us and the Ragis from the mines! Warn him! He is the fortune-teller of the Brahma-temple!’

The crowd did not let the penitents go; Maskarin took care of that. The circle remained enclosed. The cavalry-men of Sagka were alerted and both Salyas were taken prisoners. The other Salya asked permission to warn his friend living nearby. He went in and a few seconds later an old *bhikshu*² left the house. The leader of the riders knew it was Maskarin who sped away. The wonders of the day became even more astonishing for the people when the other Salya did not return. He left without a trace. Immediately the legend spread that both penitents had merged again into one Sunasepha. Like a whirlwind the news swept through the town that Sunasepha and Shakuni had returned to the city in spite of the harsh sentence passed on them by Bindusara, and were inciting the people against Maharajah Ashoka.

Ashoka then ordered the imprisonment of Shakuni, Simha, the secret council of the Brahmin-court and other undesirable members. Shakuni, though, had disappeared. Favourable feelings for Ashoka grew considerably in the capital.

Sumana approached Pataliputra from the right bank of the Ganga but Sela had positioned his large forces at the southern part of the town as well. The clash was unavoidable. At the ministers’ council, Sayana and Asandhimitra made one more attempt to prevent the catastrophic encounter. Aruna and Kala thought that the lechers of the gods had to face their doom. Asandhimitra pleaded that they should send Sayana to the camp of Sumana, as he was the only one who might still convince Sumana, Aradi and the army commanders of their folly which had its seed in their disappointment. Could one view disappointment always as stupidity, or bellicosity as unjust?

‘I do not dare to refuse, if the Maharajah allows me and the ministers’ council sees the useful purpose of it.’

BROTHERS

Sayana was received with great reverence.

‘What brings the holy Sayana to honour our camp with his visit?’

‘Respect for the will of Emperor Bindusara, fear of a battle between brothers, and the conviction that no one knows better than I do, how fatally harmful your enterprise is.’

Sayana proceeded to explain the situation: that there was not the slightest chance of a victory for Sumana, that Pataliputra was now pleased with the new Maharajah, as was a major portion of Bindusara’s empire.

On Sumana’s face a smile appeared.

‘Holy Sayana, do you know that I made offerings to the gods, day after day? That each of those offerings is performed by the most capable priests? That any possible error was made impossible by the hotar, udgatar, advaryu and principal priest? Or, do you believe that Ashoka is capable of fighting against the gods? Against Indra? What can a Raja do—he who does not perform offerings—against the overriding merits of my priests, accumulated through years!’

‘Shiva took away the body of god Kama with one ray from his eye. There is an offering of the earnest will and the deed, too, which is part of

the Atman. Well, my Sumana, this offering of Ashoka by far exceeds that of your priests.'

An uneasy silence fell on the meeting. Sumana's first minister, who felt the deep impact of Sayana's words, was the first to voice his feelings:

'We know, holy Sayana, that your feelings towards Sumana are as ill-disposed as they are of affection for the Wild Prince. Perhaps, you will understand that we feel just the contrary. That is why we look at the future differently. The choice of the new Maharajah will not depend on the keenness of a sword or on the speed of an arrow but on the will of the gods, who will anoint the Maharajah through their priests.'

'Ashoka will be Maharajah if need be without your anointment! A weak, dependent Maharajah will find in your anointment a very necessary supplement to stand up against unruly subjects. A mighty, exceedingly capable Emperor, like Ashoka, can rule just as well with or without your ceremony. When you do not surrender yourself to that fact, you sacrifice the army, the imperial family, the capital, the peace of the empire, for your lust for power. The whole world whispers that in Ashoka, Shiva has incarnated. And Shiva is Lord of death and life. Ashoka's army, that devotes itself to Shiva, awaits you in Pataliputra.'

'Sayana thinks he is able to frighten us.'

'I want to save you from delusion and from certain defeat. Your enterprise is as foolish as when you want to have a mongoose trample an elephant and, for its success, have a thousand priests sacrificed.'

'When we go after them, the wild hill-tribes from the Vindhya fade away like the morning mist before the sun,' Sumana boasted.

'Because Ashoka forbade them to attack. He merely wished to discover how strong you are. He knows your fighting strength. Do you know his? He has swept aside all the dangers which were threatening him. Did you do that, too? Sunasepha, the secret council of the Brahmin-court and all the betrayers in the army, have been imprisoned. What do you still expect to achieve? Accept the inevitable and take what Ashoka is offering you.'

'The holy Sayana is a good defender of Ashoka's case.'

'You are mistaken, first minister of the Raja. I am defending your Lord against you. Ashoka is able to defend himself better than any of you, or even us, can do. For me it is horrendous to see the two sons of my beloved

Maharajah Bindusara march against each other. I know what the end will be if you persist with your plans. For that I wish to save Raja Sumana.'

'You forget, holy Sayana,' interposed Sumana's wife, 'that my husband is the oldest son of the Maharajah, that he has always honoured the gods and the laws of the country, that the Brahmin priests will anoint only Sumana as the Emperor of India and that Indra and the people will acknowledge only him. What does it matter therefore that your friend Ashoka has an army that is stronger than that of the Crown Prince! Neither Sumana nor I, nor the council of our ministers, will disobey the command of the gods: 'Go to Pataliputra and have Sumana anointed as Maharajah of India.' Let that be known to your lord.'

'I feel sorry, high Rani, that you and your husband risk your lives, the soldiers their fame, and the priests their faith.'

'You talk as if you doubt the power of the gods,' Aradi spoke haughtily.

'You act as though you disbelieve Shiva. I fear you will realise too late your great mistake.'

Sayana bowed to the Rani, saluted the others, before returning to the capital.

Ashoka then had his army wait in ambush in a semi-circle from the south gate close to the road along the side of the Ganga. In front were the heavily armed war chariots, backed by war-elephants. The foot soldiers were behind them. The Bhils and Rajputans were to close the circle behind Sumana's army. It was a trap in which only the most dull-witted of commanders would have allowed themselves to be caught. When the first troops arrived at the gate, the circle of Ashoka's soldiers closed in around the marching army like a wall. The more the divisions of the enemy drew together in the corner between Pataliputra, the Ganga and the army of the Emperor, the more Ashoka squeezed them in, encircling them.

Sumana had the war conches blown and imperiously demanded entry into the city. The Ganga gate was not opened. Suddenly, from behind the walls of the city, a fierce tumult was heard: Conches blared and deep tom-tom sounds of the drums were carried over Sumana's camp. The Raja smiled. For a brief moment, the ear-splitting noises of war drowned out all the chaos outside the gate. Would now the bridge be lowered, would the heavy palisades be opened? The noise died down. On the high wall a captain of Ashoka's army appeared.

‘Ask for permission to enter the town from the Maharajah who is encircling your army!’ he cried to the messenger of Sumana.

Ashoka’s emissary summoned Raja Sumana to surrender to the Maharajah.

‘Tell Prince Ashoka that the Crown Prince will not negotiate with a throne-thief.’

Ashoka was still hesitant. Sumana’s council of ministers consoled the Raja that the gods had refused to intervene yet since the battle had not really begun. At last, they advised Sumana to give the orders to start the attack. Sumana, with the courage brought on by false faith and disappointment that the anticipated assistance from the city had not come, neither understanding the delaying by his ministers, gave orders to the archers to attack the surrounding troops. Ashoka’s war chariots replied with a ferocious charge, bringing total confusion among Sumana’s soldiers. Only a vehement defence would give them a chance to escape death. Four squads led by Sumana’s brothers stormed at Ashoka’s troops with wild war-cries. The Mauryas were in the forefront, the soldiers following them. But they could not withstand Ashoka’s well-trained warriors. Like a moving palisade wall, his brigades stormed forward. Protected by iron plates and shields they faced little danger from the arrows shot by less experienced hands. Sumana saw that a victory was impossible without the anticipated supernatural help, the form of which was unknown to him, however. He gave orders for the war elephants to push back the assailants. This was not how his ministers’ council wanted it. They had asked the Raja to explicitly obey their commands. Sumana alarmed and overwhelmed them with his unexpected bravery. They tried to persuade him, to withdraw behind the lines of the fighters. The help of the gods would come as soon as Ashoka himself would come out and would start fighting. Sumana, however, gave order after order to attack, which was only mildly resisted by the enemy, which made him even more convinced of Ashoka’s powerlessness. At last the Maharajah, filled with indignation by the piffling attacks of his brother, sent a squad of his best archers, supported by war chariots against the foolhardy Raja. Sumana’s council of ministers was desperate and merely watched; nothing, however, could discourage the Raja.

‘I will fight Ashoka and shall kill him!’

Ashoka, however, did choose not to fight one who barely knew what a chakra was. The brothers of Sumana saw that a fierce attack was in the

ofing. They had wanted to decoy Ashoka in the midst of a fray, but their task to protect Sumana had gotten much more difficult now. In the fierce fighting that followed, all the four brothers fell. Sumana's council sent one body of troops after another to protect the Raja. Sumana imagined himself to be invulnerable, not realising that Ashoka still hesitated about taking his brother's life. The rock-solid belief, that he alone was being helped by the gods, was further encouraged. That is why he risked rushing ahead more and more into the tempest of war.

‘Nothing can harm one who is protected by the gods, Nataala.’

‘Sire, think of the Rani. We can still provide cover for your flight over the Ganga. You will ruin us all!’

‘Who flees when he knows that the gods fight beside him?’

He then ordered the cavalry under the protective cover of the elephants to attack Ashoka himself. Nataala tried to prevent it but Sumana cried:

‘Ahead! Imprison the rebel!’

This impetus action forced the council—to their regret and far too early—to take the measure on which their expedition had been based. The twelve priests, clad in their holy Brahmin vestments, muttering prayers, were sent ahead. Ashoka would not dare to kill them. Everything would then turn against him!

Before the elephants were able to join the horsemen, Ashoka, with a division of heavily armed chariots, and supported by the best war elephants and foot-soldiers, had the twelve priests cut off from the rest of the army. He himself took up his chakra and, together with the horsemen, charged forward towards the foolish Raja. This was the moment the ministers had been waiting for. Even with the entire army defeated, the success of their plan could not be deflected. The unexpected bravery of the Raja was not part of their calculations but once again the first minister calmly followed the course of events so that he could take action at the right time. A huge part of their armed forces had already been sacrificed in an attempt to lure Ashoka forward. Now a small but brave group faced the hated Prince. The priest gave the sign that had been agreed upon previously. The twelve warriors of the gods imperturbably strode forward in the direction of the Maharajah, seemingly oblivious to the fierce fighting around them as if it was of no concern to them. If only they could get near enough to Ashoka! Only one of the twelve needed to reach the goal! Still praying, they

approached. Suddenly, on a sign from Ashoka, a strong section of the cavalry along with fifty foot soldiers rushed towards the priests and overpowered them in no time. Resistance was impossible. They were bound firmly and taken behind the lines. Still, the Raja did not realise that his battle was lost. Completely trusting on the non-appearing heavenly fighters, he yelled out the most foolish orders to his warriors, while his cavalymen were more and more tightly encircled in a desperate death-struggle.

‘Where is the coward of Ujjain!’ Sumana’s fury was unspeakable. He took up a sword. It was a sword he could hardly handle, however, and as he flung it vigorously in the direction of the Maharajah, it whizzed by Ashoka and killed Jala, who for Ashoka’s safety fought next to him. Ashoka, infuriated, took up his chakra. Sumana took a new weapon but before he was able to wield it, a glistening razor-sharp disc flew at his throat; he toppled from his elephant to the ground.

‘Bring the corpse to the traitor’s gate. Dig a hole and burn him in his grave, then throw earth on it!’

The Emperor calmed down, and gave orders to have Sumana’s army imprisoned without further bloodshed. Sumana’s ministers’ council decided at all costs to save Aradi who would bear the new successor of the throne. All hope was not lost yet – the twelve of Shakuni! The Rani, along with the council of ministers and under strong protection, was brought by ferry over the Ganga and thence disappeared into the jungle on the other side.

The remaining warriors had to surrender. Horror swept through Pataliputra and Magadha: six imperial Princes killed, thousands of warriors of one nation killed by warriors of the same nation. Mercilessly, Shiva’s eye had laid low Bindusara’s lineage.

Sagka accompanied the Maharajah to his palace with a strong cavalry and a formation of chariots. Inside the Ganga gate many people had gathered to see and cheer the triumphant Maharajah march into the city. Some Buddhist mendicants had calmly placed themselves in the front rows, looking ahead curiously like the others. Suddenly, a troop of foot soldiers who had been marching ahead of the procession attacked them, binding their hands and feet, before taking them to the prison buildings ... they were twelve in number.

Sayana, Khallataka, and Asandhimitra awaited the Maharajah. Sura had constantly brought news from the battlefield to the palace. Just as Ashoka entered the audience hall a messenger appeared: ‘A rebellious band, led by

Shakuni, wanted to open the gate for Sumana, O, Maharajah. All the leaders have been imprisoned and the fanatical fighters killed. What does the gracious Maharajah wish to do with the prisoners?’

‘Let them be executed immediately.’

Asandhimitra placed her hand on Ashoka’s arm.

‘My Maharajah, do not celebrate your victory with new deaths.’

‘It is not a celebration, neither are we in the flush of victory, Asandhimitra. It is an execution.’

‘Piyadasi, many thought Sumana was entitled to the ivory throne.’

‘It is the Brahmin-court which thought they were entitled to, revered Sayana.’

‘One does not kill Brahmins. They are summoned before the court of Brahma. A judge who ponders for a day more about a serious crime does not decree capital penalty easily.’

‘Seven times Shakuni deserved death.’

‘Then he will be condemned.’

‘Tomorrow morning in the first *kalakramein* the court will judge him and those who helped him. The guards will be tortured to death if they let him flee.’

‘Sire, let friendliness guide you on your path, now you are the master in this country.’

‘I cannot permit any weakness in myself now, Asandhimitra. I have to assert my powers.’

‘Then do assert them with goodness, Sire.’

‘Goodness strengthens fanaticism, beautiful Asandhimitra. Were you to spare a coward then he begins to think himself to be the protégé of the gods: Sumana! When I do treat the priests with respect they assume it is fear: Shakuni, Sunasepha!’

‘One does not cure hatred with hatred, hatred one cures with love, my lord.’

‘Except for priest’s hatred. That, one cures with power.’

‘Your power now is so great that you may be able to conquer their hatred, my Piyadasi.’

‘Their hatred is too strong for them to believe in my power. Twenty-four murderers, Sayana! I was to be killed, Sumana the only successor, and they the masters of Aryavarta. The first twelve I have had bound on the

battlefield, the other twelve at my entry into the city. That is the enigmatic solution of their puzzling expedition. One weak moment and the fight is sparked off once again: the blood that tolerance demands.'

'Friendliness subdues the wild elephant, my Maharajah.'

'But not the tiger, for he knows no friendliness, beautiful Asandhimitra.'

'Who takes up the sword against his own people, will fall on that sword, revered Maharajah.'

'But he who dared to send killers with poisoned daggers against his Maharajah deserved to be killed by the sword. That is what justice demands. Their secretive incitement will have to be ended, however much I regret that my three best friends have such different opinions.'



CUNNING AND REVENGE

Shakuni realised that it would be easier for an elephant to get out of the palisaded enclosure of an elephant-trap than for him to escape death. There remained only one way out: the sentries. Someone lost in the jungle of Jambudvipa may well ask a fool to show him the way out of the wilderness. But Shakuni was not the person to not attempt such last possibility. He assumed a yogic posture and sat for hours in a corner of the shed that was enclosed by heavy palisades. The guards understood from his vacant eyes and motionless gaze that the priest was in deep meditation. He, however, did not miss a single word of their conversation. He heard that Jana was very happy with the outcome of the events. It soon became quiet and in the long night, boredom crept in; that was when the guards decided to take rest alternately. When Jana fell asleep after the exertions of the day, the others watched Shakuni awakening from his state of meditation.

‘Varisara ...’ he whispered.

‘Here,’ the other said softly so as not to wake up Jana.

‘Your father has died. His soul just visited me and orders you to go to his home in Kosambi.’

‘Very well. But first we have to bring you to the Ganga, Shakuni,’ mocked Varisara, but in his mocking there lurked fears of the mysterious Brahma-priest!

‘Bring me to the Ganga whenever you feel like. But your own fate, Varisara. You have to kill a Brahmin. Thousands of wrecked incarnations before you are back where you are now.’

‘When will my first rebirth take place, soothsayer of the Brahma-temple?’

‘That will be a long time yet. Before that you will go to a faraway country and will be elevated to a place of high respect. Your downfall will be so much the worse. Your first reincarnation, a Shudra -dog, because you killed a priest.’

‘Where will I go, sir?’

Ha! Sir! Shakuni’s heart leapt. The other two guards also approached the priest curiously.

‘To the south, to the great ocean where the Ganga’s holy water flows. You will be in command of many soldiers.’

‘Do I betray the Maharajah?’

‘The Maharajah betrays you. Thousands of wrecked rebirths he causes you. He does not kill the priests; you are the ones who have to do that! So, the revenge of the gods will be for you. Soon, Brihaspati will send one of his devis to request my freedom. Do not give in. Ashoka will torture you, kill you. Rather, drown me in the holy Ganga. Nothing can spare the Maharajah from the deepest of hells.’

‘And if we refuse to kill a priest?’

‘Whosoever serves an unlawful Maharajah, commits an unlawful deed himself. Rather, go to your mother and support her like your father wishes. But you are horse-guards and care only for prestige. Which soldier does not wish to enhance his prestige?’

‘Do you know where it is?’

‘I know all.’

‘Then how can you spare us from a priest’s murder?’ Banu asked.

‘I am not a warrior! What do I have to do with you anyway! Shiva forces you to a priest-murder! I enhance my own karma, not yours. You are a simple guard in the hands of injustice. If you wish to be so until your

death, that is your decision, not mine. I am not giving you counsel as I am not receiving the priest-reward anyway!’

‘How much reward do you want? A handful of gold?’

‘Gold! Gold, the fool says! To take it with me into the Ganga? Each fee for me as a priest increased the treasures of the holy Brahma-temple! Tomorrow, you will drown me since it pleases a Shudra! A Shudra! And then Kshatriyas dare to ask me for my holy Brahman knowledge?’

Shakuni assumed his posture of a yogi again, feigning, as though he wished to leave the guards to their curiosity. His hands assumed the *mudra*¹ of surrender, his eyes froze.

‘Forecast our future for us, priest.’

But Shakuni did not move.

‘What do you wish from us?’

‘I merely wish freedom to serve Brahma and Brihaspati or to be drowned in the Ganga. And then my soul will force the gods to punish the profaners of the sacred varna. You, too! You cannot bind my soul to a shed of palisades!’ The threatening tone alarmed the guards.

‘If we release you, Sir, we will be tortured to death!’

‘If you kill Brahmins you will be tortured to death a thousand times. Keep silent! Before my death, I wish to pray.’

Again, Shakuni took up the posture of meditation.

‘Sir, how may we atone?’

‘You let me free or you leave me alone.’

‘The most horrible punishment awaits us.’

‘Join me to serve Brahma, Indra, Brahispati and Varuna.’ The horse-guards went a short distance from his cage and whispered. Noiselessly a woman approached.

‘Who are you and what do you want?’

‘Bayadere of the Brahma-temple. Brihaspati asks you to free the holy Brahma-priest.’

‘Shiva will destroy us.’

‘Suni will sacrifice for you. Join us and protect him.’

‘Jana will betray us.’

Sinka approached Shakuni, whispered hastily with him, after which she turned to the horse-guards.

‘Tie up Jana, give his clothes to Shakuni. Try to escape through the gate at the Son. Tell the sentry you have an urgent message from Khallataka to Sela.’

The guards still hesitated. Then, suddenly, they came into action. Outside the town they fled at breakneck speed to the prisoners’ camp. Shakuni knew that a division of Sumana’s army had been sent there to free the army commanders. The camp was in a great uproar, the guards were overpowered; all others made themselves ready for a speedy flight. Shakuni was received with cheers and joy. Then all of them left for the country where Ashoka’s powers did not extend.

Ashoka’s fear of an assassination grew. That night he changed his sleeping place four times.

Early next morning, the court of Brahma was organised to sentence the traitors. Khallataka took his place as the head. Aruna and Kala were the judges. Ashoka forced twelve priests who he knew were his most ferocious opponents, and twelve others—all sympathetic with Sivi and inclined to sympathise with the new Maharajah, and some civilians—to join the court.

‘Bring Shakuni and Sunasepha into the hall,’ Khallataka ordered.

Sunasepha appeared in the midst of his guards, but Jana entered, upset.

‘Sire, he fled together with the three horse-guards, after they tied and gagged me and took away my riding clothes.’

Ashoka jumped up. ‘Where?’

‘I don’t know, Sire. Shakuni snarled at me: ‘Tell your Lord that I will come back one day.’”

Ashoka reflected for a while and finally said to Sagka: ‘Immediately ask for a thousand-strong cavalry from Sela and speed as hastily as possible to the prisoners’ camp. A division of Sumana’s army has been marching along the left bank of the Ganga. I now suspect it was to free the imprisoned officers who had to take over the command of the army. Continue with this priest, my Khallataka!’

Sunasepha trembled; Khallataka went on calmly:

‘And you, Sunasepha, what were the last words of Prince Ashoka in the hermitage of Devaka and Richika?’

‘I do not know, Sire.’

‘Refresh his memory, Batu,’ Khallataka spoke to the servant of the torture rack.

‘Yes, Sir, I do remember. The very first time I returned to Pataliputra my death-warrant would be signed.’

‘So, your death-warrant will now be signed. You will die by drowning in the Ganga.’

‘For that I grant mercy, gentlemen judges,’ Ashoka spoke so sharply that it sounded more like a verdict.

‘What were you up to, in Pataliputra?’

‘Sire, I walked around the city as a holy man ... Salya.’

‘Simha, what can you tell us as a witness?’

‘Sunasepha and Shakuni persuaded us to choose Sumana’s faction, to open the Ganga gate for Prince Sumana. Kampaka and I would be promoted in the army for that.’

‘Well, Sunasepha, so you have conspired against the Maharajah. For that even a Brahmin is sentenced with capital punishment. For the second time I sentence you to death by drowning in the Ganga.’

Again, Ashoka rose: ‘Sir Judge, I grant him mercy for this deed, too.’ Sunasepha believed that the Maharajah feared him.

‘Who motivated the twelve inhabitants of Pataliputra to kill the Maharajah at his entry, gave them poisoned daggers and pardoned them their deed in advance, who trained them in that craft ever reminding them of the exalted purpose of their deed, ordered them to disguise themselves in the robes of Bhikshus, so that they under the protection of a monk’s robe, that means, stolen holiness, would perform their deed?’

‘Shakuni, Sir,’ answered the penitent, smugly.

‘Show in the twelve murderers.’ They were still manacled heavily.

‘Take off the robes which do not belong to them.’

‘Sire, the gowns belong to us. They are ours.’

‘The material, but not the dignity they represent in the empire of the Maharajah. Take them off!’ The gowns were taken away and the twelve men were seen to be clad in heavy armour.

‘That looks more honest. Now perform the oath that you will speak the truth. Who persuaded you to kill the reigning Maharajah, under the cover of the holy priestly garb?’

‘Salya, Sire.’

‘They are lying, noble Khallataka.’

Khallataka called in the temple-servant from the Brahma-temple.

‘Perform your oath. Now, who ordered these men to kill the Maharajah?’

‘Salya, Sire. A traitor from the army camp trained them daily.’

‘Do you know with what purpose?’

‘Yes Sire.’

‘Testify honestly without hiding anything.’

‘Sire, they were trained daily in wrestling and in the use of weapons. Continuously, they were told that all the gods wished for the death of Raja Ashoka. If they were to die then the most heavenly place would be awaiting them, and if the gods would spare them, the highest esteem.’

Sunasepha bent his head.

‘Do you have anything to say against this, Sunasepha?’

‘No, Sire.’

‘You realise that for the third time you deserve capital punishment, because you forced other people—by means of your religious position, which may only serve to elevate men to a higher awareness and life—to kill, in the disguise of a bhikshu, the ruling Maharajah of Aryavarta.’

‘According to Vedic canons, Prince Sumana must be the successor.’

‘Is a criminal priest to decide that or is it the holy Maharajah? And for all the rest you admit the facts?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

Then I sentence you to death by drowning in the Ganga.’

All eyes were directed towards the Maharajah. Would he grant mercy now, too? Sunasepha did not expect anything else: Ashoka feared the priests, after all! But Ashoka kept silent.

Salya was then led to the Ganga.

Simha and the other traitors from amongst the horse-guards were sentenced to death by being pierced with arrows. The execution would take place in the army camp in the presence of the warriors. The twenty-four killers were sentenced to death by torture.

Ashoka sought out his working chamber but could not focus his thoughts on work. Every day sentences were being passed ... because he had become Maharajah. Would this ever end? Would the priests sow hatred forever, and he, arouse hate with every measure, with every sentence! Girika and Maskarin's spies tracked down the culprits who had been following the priests in their anger against the unwanted Maharajah. Like the Shiva of death, he raged through Aryavarta, as if the gods had created people for his revenge. And all that he wished for was peace and quiet, occupation, work, prosperity, happiness for his people. What was it that fate wanted from him? To spare his enemies would increase their resistance. To destroy everything that was obstructing his path would suppress their rebellion but stir up their hatred. He wanted to come to an agreement with his peoples and to realise his earlier ideals! Who sets the limits of both the eternities, before and after life? Could he compel all, with violence, to his views? With more forbearance then? Which way? Asandhimitra, which way! A seeking, powerless powerful one, in the darkness of the endless jungle ... Asandhi!

‘Asandhimitra, your face is as cheerless as the moon in *Sravana*². Do you know that sadness will wear out your beauty as a storm wears on the frail beauty of a flower in Vesanta? Is it boredom that pales the flowers of your cheeks? Does the Rani miss music, dance or play? I will give it to you.’

‘No, Sire.’

‘You wanted to learn to love me, Asandhimitra, and sadness rules your soul?’ Ashoka asked, slightly mocking.

‘Can I learn to love someone who only believes in violence, honoured Maharajah?’

‘It is my only support!’

‘It is your only weakness, Sir, with your army of hundred thousand warriors. You killed priests and many citizens of this town. You put sullen anxiety in the hearts of others. Simha and his guards, prodded by criminals like Shakuni and Sunasepha with the ever-ready lash of their religion, you want them killed by arrows in the most hurtful way ... in front of their brothers-in-arms. Is revenge so sweet? Murderers, poisoned by the false reasoning of fanatical priests, you want to be tortured until death frees them. Does it please you to see people suffer in so gruesome a manner? Can revenge ever serve to bring happiness to your people? Sunasepha followed

Chandaka, Panthaka, and Lambaka into the Ganga. Will the sanctity of the enfolding waves over their bodies not lead to renewed hate instead of the happiness that you thought you could bring, more than Sumana? Where will my Lord hide himself from so much hatred and fear and revenge which will only increase hatred?’

‘He who caresses the tiger will be devoured for a meal, dear figure with the delicate-blue scarf.’

‘But he who hurts the angry elephant will be hated by the animal for the rest of his life, Shiva of death.’

‘Will he let himself be trampled by the animal?’

‘He has, by his manas and his help, the power to bind the animal, thence to lead it by friendly treatment to better insight and softness.’

Ashoka lowered his head onto his hands, bent over, for a long time. Asandhimitra dropped softly by his seat and sat immobile, her face turned towards the floor, hands pressed together at his feet. No feeling of grief was aroused by this brave woman who dared to disapprove the deeds done by him, the mighty one. Was he really on a wrong path? Then he would return!

‘How do I secure unity in my empire, Asandhimitra, when these fanatical priests thwart my measures everywhere?’

‘How do you secure unity in your empire when you, by your deeds, kindle hatred sky-high, Sire!’ Her voice trembled.

Passionately he jumped up and began pacing the room.

‘I do not see another way!’ he burst out at last.

‘How then did you bring the rebellious west to the Maharajah again and taught the corrupt merchants of Ujjain and Bharuchkacha their duties?’

‘There the people themselves desired peace and quiet!’

‘Do you not believe that all people wish for peace and quiet?’

‘All, except the influential and all-despising sacrificial priests!’

‘But they, too, have to be guided towards the Maharajah and are not to be alienated. You have the ability to do so, Sire, because you are mighty and great.’

Ashoka stood close to her, looking for a long time at the woman bowed in front of him. She did not look up at him although she knew how she could use her beauty.

‘In Taxila I spoke with many wise men, Asandhimitra. Each praised his faith as the true one. Should not there be one belief that is right, but there

are many, divided into an infinite number of sects ...’

‘Choose then the best, Sir.’

‘The best, you say, Asandhimitra, the best? Were I to choose one of the hundred as the best then I have ninety-nine opposing me, bringing their hatred into my empire.’

‘Then choose all, Sire, the *sara*, the essence of all.’

Ashoka looked at her, moved: She had stirred in him an almost forgotten, at least, cast-off thought. ‘What the sacrificial priests do is not in the spirit of the Vedas, and the struggle between the sects is because of the feeling by all of being incapable to bring true happiness. You do have the power, Sire.’

‘But the dark power of the others, my Asandhimitra!’

‘The secret of your power is righteousness, noble Maharajah, not one of the others can withstand.’

‘That righteousness I can only support by just decrees.’

‘Your verdicts are a tradition of your grandfather and Kautilya, his minister. Do you punish out of hatred? Out of revenge?’

‘To deter.’

‘So, you want a few to suffer in order to deter many. Is that righteous? Why do those few have to carry the burden of punishment while others who sinned as much as they or have the same intentions, go free? Why do you not try to unite them all with goodness, leniency, providence?’

‘The delicate-blue scarf!’

‘The ... delicate-blue scarf!’

‘Do you know how I curse sometimes your delicate-blue scarf, Asandhimitra, because it prevents me from appraising the hatred of all those ... in a proper way.’

‘That must be in your moments of weakness, Sire, when you doubt your ever so great power and the sacredness of the Atman, which is unfolding in all, the blissful feeling of Atman ... *Tat Tvam Asi!* You do thirst for the happiness of all creatures! Why then should you want to increase hatred, my Lord!’

Again, Ashoka walked heatedly up and down the chamber. How deep she could gauge him!

‘Well, beautiful Asandhimitra. I shall grant mercy to Simha and the horse-guards who betrayed their master and to the twenty-four murderers

who wished my death even sacrificing their own lives. I will send them to the deserted mines at the Gandaki. Let them learn over there to defer to the new Maharajah.'

Assandhimitra deferentially placed her hands together, bowed to her Lord, kissing the hem of his robe.

'The delicate-blue scarf, Asandhimitra,' he laughed, raised her beautiful figure, and saw her tears. 'Asandhimitra, why do you cry?'

'Sire, because for the first time I have met Sayana's friend, Piyadasi.'

Ashoka left the chamber without uttering another word.



REGULATE

With indomitable energy the Maharajah threw himself into the task of ruling the endless empire the way he had learned to during his work in the western states. It was as if a sudden current pulsated through life and movement in the capital, as though everything moved faster and the people have risen out of turbulent times, their faces reflecting renewed energy. A feeling of increased security returned to daily life. The influence of the Maharajah spread from the capital to Magadha and Madhyadesa, and from there, to other provinces.

In *Sravana*¹ the rains set in, as predicted by the priests with the precision of experience and astronomical knowledge, and welcomed with sacrifices, prayers, and oblation fees. It was then that Sagka returned. He had left the camp having found that all the guards had been killed. The tracks of the fugitives led to the south. At the border of Sodra, he came within half-a-day's travel of them. The rainy season which had just set in made further pursuit useless.

‘So, where did they go?’

‘To the Kalingas², Sire.’

Maskarin sent by Ashoka to the Kalingas returned some months later and reported that all the fugitives had entered the service of the Raja of

Kalinga. Prince Sarata was training the rapidly growing army and Shakuni was leading the religious sacrificial ceremonies to make the gods look kindly on Kalinga that was becoming a danger for the Maharajah.

‘Girika, what did you learn on your mission?’

‘After the battle, Aradi was to be brought to Vaishali by the warriors of Sumana but along the way she felt so weak that they put her up in a Buddhist monastery, the Khemavana. The Abbot of the monastery felt compassion for the Rani, rendered her due honour and offered her his services. She soon recovered and stayed in the monastery. Now she has bore a son, Nigrodha.’

‘And Sumana’s council?’

‘They wanted to compel her to leave the monastery of the mendicants. Aradi refused, as she did not wish to sacrifice her little son to the ivory throne. Nirgradha will likely be brought up in the Buddhist manner.’

Kalinga, incited by Prince Sarata, Shakuni and the escaped priests ... An ambitious king who was persuaded by them to enlarge his territory at the expense of the despised Maharajah. That meant one thing: preparations for war to repulse the enemy. Strike down. Hatred. And the Anthapura? How many of them had wanted Sumana on the throne, one who was expected to bring pleasure, enjoyment, luxury, wealth. He, Ashoka, wanted to work, obviate the injustice of the laws, set at naught the agonising injustice done towards the accursed ones in his countries. Tolerance of all peoples, the religions, the hundreds of sects, peace and quiet in his empire, prosperity for all. But all who were sacrificial priests were resisting. Everywhere there were deadly enemies. Was he safe in his own palace? Satyavat could not always keep watch! Who knew that he would sleep in this room this night? He would rather get up, go to another room, so that no one could be certain where he would sleep. So, ... the five chakras ... ‘How will you achieve unity in your empire, when you increase hatred by your deeds?’ ... Certainly, Asandhimitra! How? Compliance they view as weakness, rapprochement as an opportunity to slake their hatred. Only to power do they give way! Was that the way? And the sara of all religions that he wished to trace! How much struggle did he have to face yet, before tolerance would reign in his empire? Before the people would replace the paltry ceremonies which were now governing life, by a good and pure way of life? Before man would conquer himself? Sanctions, sanctions! Was that the way? Against his thousands of secret enemies, weakness was certainly

not befitting. Those who did not want it his way would have to give way. The power was his! And that would rule in battle as well as when all would acknowledge that his view had been right.

The Maharajah took an early bath. While the servants were taking care of his clothing and other personal needs, a Mahamatra from the far eastern part of his empire was announced. Anti went on with Ashoka's dressing.

'The Raja from Anga refuses to pay his lawful tribute, O, Maharajah, because no one has been anointed after the death of Bindusara. Neither does he want to come to the capital to pay his obeisance to your Gracious Majesty. I can only conclude that he has been instigated by the escaped army commanders and the priests of Pataliputra.'

'You will appear later in the *Parishad*³.'

'Sire, the *Anta-mahamatra*⁴ of Suhma has arrived this morning. He asks Your Gracious Majesty whether he could be received now or at the palace audience later on.'

'How much time do you and the girls need yet, Anti?'

'Ten minutes, Sire.'

'Let him in.'

'So, Kaptika, what news do you bring from the borders of Kalinga?'

'Sire, the Kalingans pursue their hunt across the borders of Sodra. I have informed them that they were hunting on your territory; they said the Maharajah could not oppose it. It was the territory that the Mauryas had once taken but, in all fairness, belonged to Kalinga.'

'And you accepted that?'

'I have requested them to immediately vacate your territory and ordered them to leave the hunting booty behind. Sutima, the chief, asked whether my Maharajah had already been anointed. The others laughed, swiftly took away the animals, and left. The same day I left for Pataliputra.'

'You will appear in the parishad later, Kaptika, as a witness.'

'Sire, the high Purusha from Jamunapura wishes to notify you.' Ashoka now was dressed but yet did receive the palace functionary.

'The Rajuka of Bharata did not accede to my request to keep the irrigation work in good condition, O, Maharajah. The harvest withers away. The population grows poor. My plans for the enlargement of the irrigation work have not been executed.'

'I had ordered him some months ago to support your plans.'

‘He promised, again and again, to call for the Vaishyas to perform their obligatory labour for the Maharajah. The Rajuka is only interested in feasting, gambling, drinking-bouts, animal fights, and sacrificial ceremonies. If I remind him of the order of the Maharajah, he asks: ‘Which Maharajah?’ My plans for the canals and dams are still lying there.’

‘We shall end the governance of this Rajuka who is going to be ruinous for Bharata.’

Before the meeting of the *parishad*, the Maharajah first listened to the complaints and requests of the many subjects in the durbar hall. Asandhimitra had also made her way to the audience hall.

‘I am happy to see you are interested, Asandhimitra. Take the seat next to me. As you see, there are many who need the support of the Maharajah.’

Satyavat checked personally if the visitors were carrying weapons. In spite of the five chakras which he always had with him, Ashoka approved of this measure of Satyavat.

Each case was registered by the *lipikaras*⁵ and handed over to the Mahamatryas for further investigation, together with the decisions of the Maharajah.

Some Vaishyas from Mauda, south of the Son, complained that the governor took a quarter portion of their harvest and made them work four days a week on his estates.

‘I only permit one-sixth part of the harvest and one day of work!’

‘He who complains is severely punished, O, Maharajah.’

‘Write an order to the department of revenue collection that a high Purusha, together with fifteen lower Purushas, will leave for Mauda to thoroughly investigate the actions of the governor. I wish to have a report from them in a month’s time.’

With surprising speed the Maharajah worked through all the complaints, dictated one order after another, stamped them with the regal seal, and had them dispatched by the *lipikaras*.

Two young Vaishyas requested mercy for their father.

‘For what is he imprisoned?’

‘Father has insulted the Brahmin, Narada, O, Maharajah, in a dispute over the fees for the offering ceremony. Father would pay with five cows. When the sacrifice was performed, Narada wanted ten. A neighbour had suggested that father was prosperous enough to give away ten cows. Father

refused and called Narada a greedy hoarder. The court decreed that he had to provide the ten cows and serve a sentence of a year's for slandering a Brahmin. We are poor and none can farm the land properly. All of us are threatened by famine. If we do not pay the land duties, we will be driven away. Give back to us our father, holy Maharajah.'

'He who insults another has to bear being punished for it.'

'But we did not do any harm, noble Maharajah, and we are the ones who have to bear the burden of punishment and suffering the most. Father spoke in a fit of rage, Sire, because all his cattle had been taken away from him.'

Ashoka observed the bright young man. 'And what if I refuse to grant mercy?'

'Then today, I shall bring my last offering to Shiva, Sire, as the god of righteousness.'

'Give orders for the case to be investigated and command that if what the son tells us is true, the Vaishya be granted mercy for the sake of the family. At the same time, bring him five young cows so he may resume his work on the farm.'

The boys thanked the Maharajah profusely.

'Tell your father that labour itself is the highest sacrifice to Shiva.'

'Sire, Satyagupta and I receive water from the same canal. Often, at night he opens the sluice gates and allows the water to flow, water to which he is not entitled. The Pradesika advised me to request you to take away Satyagupta's field which bears little fruit because it is being tilled badly. If it were to be joined with my land then the tax collectors would get more levies.'

'Do you receive the same amount of water, Paila?'

'No, Sire, I receive more.'

'Why?'

'The Pradesika allowed me more, Sire.'

'Is that why your land is more fertile, Paila?'

'That is possible, Sire, the Pradesika decides how much water each field requires.'

'And Satyagupta's field dries away?'

'Because the water supply is cut off. I would be able to make the field of Your gracious Maharajah fruitful again.'

‘Would not Satyagupta himself be able to make it bloom again if he were to get more water? Tell me the truth honestly, Paila, swear that you will tell the truth.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Has Satyagupta not complained to the Pradesika? And what did he have to say?’

At that moment, Satyagupta came forward and dropped down with stretched-out arms, in front of the Maharajah, who asked: ‘Who are you?’

‘Satyagupta, Sire.’

‘Speak, Saytagupta.’

‘Mighty Maharajah, my field dries out because the Pradesika of Visapura has barred me from the water supply. Paila tolerates the visits of the Pradesika to his beautiful young wife. Therefore, he was allowed more water, to my detriment. I opened the sluice gates at night to get my rightful share. I do pay my land taxes and my water rights as much as he does. Since it was discovered, my water supply has been cut off, gracious Maharajah,’ the Vaishya sobbed. ‘Soon, I will not be able to pay my land fees anymore and will be cast out from the land.’

‘You should have complained and not acted on your own authority, Satyagupta.’

‘My complaints to the Pradesika did not help, O, Maharajah.’

‘Why did you not come earlier to me?’

‘Everyone fears the Pradesika, Sire. Now he wants to steal away my farm lands, if you approve.’

‘And you, Paila ... Does Satyagupta tell the truth?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Return to Visapura; you will hear of my decision.’

‘Lipikara, issue an order that the Pradesika of Vasipura is dismissed. Tomorrow a Purusha will leave to conduct the investigation. Satyagupta’s water supply will be restored immediately.’

‘Sire, in Virabhum, the law is that for the same offence, a Shudra is given a punishment that is four times as heavy as for a Brahmin. The court of Brahma has given me a fine, ten times as much as for a Brahmin for the same offence. The Brahmin had to pay fifty, and I, five hundred karshapanas.’

‘Perform the oath. So, what crime did you commit?’ The Shudra’s face flushed and he wavered in answering.

‘What crime!’

‘Adultery with a woman of my own varna, Sire.’

‘And do you wish that I should lessen your punishment or increase that of the Brahmin?’

‘Lessen mine, gracious Maharajah.’

‘The punishment for such deeds I will never lessen! Return to Virabhum and do not sin again; then the punishment will not reach you.’

When all were heard the Maharajah turned to Asandhimitra.

‘May I know, what the High Rani thinks about all these interrogations?’

‘Have you investigated all the cases that come up for your judgement day after day, Sire? People come from far and wide and in such large numbers!’

‘Do you think, Asandhimitra, that I wish to be like the mighty rain cloud that floats by and does not give rain? Or, like the potter, who is turning his wheel but did not take care if he had clay? My orders are strictly executed by experienced and trustworthy civil servants, under the control of my secret informants. If my people pay their taxes and I do not perform the duties of the king, it would be better that Sumana was seated here!’

‘Sire, I did not come to make comments.’

‘To listen to the complaints! To see, if the Maharajah is also applying his power, to burden himself with the hatred of the priests?’

‘No, Sire, to learn to love ... the righteous Maharajah ...’

‘Then come along with me now to the parishad, Asandhimitra.’

In the parishad, Ashoka had the three Mahamatras repeat their statements of that morning.

‘In response to the information brought to you by the Mahamatra of Anga, I will send an army, three times the strength of that of the Raja and have the obstinate king Kansa taken prisoner and sent to Pataliputra.’

‘Do you wish to deprive the Raja of his lands, Sire?’ Khallataka asked.

‘Not if he pays his due respects, and as punishment pays double his levies and complies with his duties.’

‘None of the ministers could have anything against that, O Maharajah.’

‘Already three times in my brief period of reign, I have been informed about the violation of borders by the people of Kalinga. I will send a delegation to the Raja with the demand that he acknowledges his mistake by paying me a hundred measures of gold for hunting on my territory, and to extradite Sutima and Shakuni. I would like to hear your opinion on this.’

‘Does this mean war if he refuses, Sire?’

‘No, but certainly a more tense relationship.’

‘Kalinga is arming itself heavily, Sire,’ remarked Radhagupta, minister of war affairs.

‘I know, high minister. Now they themselves have it in their hands still to prevent their own destruction.’

‘Do you fear war, O, Maharajah?’

‘No, but I do not wish to be taken by surprise. When my brothers seek war I cannot prevent that, but I can, with the Raja of Kalinga. If he is not willing to do so then they may expect me to become an *Asura-vyaya*⁶, and Kalinga will become a part of my empire.’

All nodded their approval.

‘I wish to appoint Khallataka’s son, Asvin, as the governor of Bharata.’

‘Bharata is an important province, Sire, and Asvin is very young. Would you not prefer to appoint Arada’s son, Sakata? He has to spend his years in idleness. Arada turned away from you because his daughter became Sumana’s wife. Does this not look like a good opportunity to reconcile with the family of Arada?’

‘Is Sakata capable of succeeding that lazy merry-maker of Bharata? None of you know? I am inclined to reconcile with Arada but not at the cost of Bharata. Arada’s son was a friend of Sumana and up till now lived for his pleasures. In Prakriti’s house he sacrifices much to Kama and the wine jug. The people of Bharata demand, however, a just, serious, diligent and even more energetic rajuka. Khallataka’s son possesses these qualities in spite of his young age. He will be the one to replace the sluggard and squanderer of Bharata, and bring the country to bloom again. I need a new Pradesika in Visapura. Do you think Sakata is capable of that governance? The situation over there is good, the people are prosperous. Which of you can assure me that Sakata will be the right one there? Which of you knows his virtues?’

No one could answer Ashoka’s questions.

‘Then I will nevertheless appoint Sakata, because I heard—coincidentally—that he never got into debt at Prakriti’s, was strongly opposed to Aradi’s marriage to Sumana, that Jocardno and Sahula kept their murderous plans anxiously away from him, that he begged his father to go along with me to the West, and refused to join Sumana to Taxila. I will investigate his capability and diligence. His character seems to me, though, a guarantee for a just government.’ The parishad kept silent.

‘Sire,’ Aruna interposed, ‘we hear that the Rajas, rajukas, purushas still hide themselves behind the pretext that the new Maharajah has not been anointed yet. Would it not be wise for the sake of peace in the country to let yourself be anointed?’

‘As long as I do not find a priest from whom I can expect, in all fairness, that he will promote my interests, I do not wish to make an offering in this way.’

‘The tanunaptram, O, Maharajah.’

‘My labour is the sacrifice to Varuna, my justice to Brihaspati, the right application of the laws the offering to Manu, my life to Shiva! Do I then still need the offerings of the priests? A banyan does not grow into a holy tree in one Vasanta.

The meeting ended.

‘Come, my Rani, all these government affairs must be tiresome. Join me in the park.’ Ashoka beckoned the boatman in the great pond. Raja and Rani seated themselves on the high seat at the rear of the boat.

‘Sire, you always touch me with your wise decisions.’

‘The delicate-blue scarf, my Asandhimitra,’ mocked the Maharajah.

Asandhimitra laughed shyly. ‘Do you see my father’s dream and explanation as foolish?’

‘Foolish? No one in India has seen better what I was missing! Your father, Asandhimitra, must have known with his clear manas what I wanted and, at the same time, what immense obstacles I would meet on my path. People expected from Chandragupta compassion for suffering mankind. His strictness became so rigid, so ruthless, that he feared himself, abdicating from his reign to continue his life as a Jain monk. I feel like him. There are people who wish to exclude the deprived ones from happiness so that they are doomed from birth to death. I want to wipe them out, and I will,

Asandhimitra. But it is as if I have to keep on killing more, to protect the weak.'

'Do you want a war with the people of Kalinga, Sire?'

'No, but they might convince themselves I am weak. They will feel the weight of my chakra, Asandhimitra, if they risk a war with me.'

'Not the Raja and his Council ... but the people of Kalinga, Sire!'

'It is not that the people of Kalinga have nothing to do with it. For that their army is too large. Moreover, are incited people innocent? In many parts of my empire, the insurgents act under pressure from the sacrificial priests and other interested parties. If I do not punish them, then the work of those who incite others will become even easier. Then I am called weak and afraid. You see, all is not that simple.'

'I have always thought that your army is mighty and invincible.'

'But not invulnerable. And neither am I.'



RANI KURAVAKI

Several months later, Sagka returned with his army from Anga. King Kansa was brought in as a prisoner, ready to meet all the wishes of the Maharajah. The king was brought to the army camp and, quietly, Sagka revealed to him Ashoka's tremendous power. Kansa grew silent. Along with his daughter, whom he had taken along to appease the Maharajah, he was escorted to one of the farthest buildings in the camp.

'When will I see the Maharajah?'

'When it pleases the Maharajah, O, King.'

'Am I still the King of Anga?'

'If it pleases the Maharajah, O, King.'

'Ask the Maharajah when I can pay my tribute.'

Ashoka let Kansa wait for a week, after which he and his daughter were taken in a war chariot to the palace in the capital. Thousands of people had gathered along the road. Kansa had refused to pay obeisance, was conquered, imprisoned, and forced to go to the palace, unarmed, without being shown the respect that was due to him. That aroused the mockery of the inhabitants.

'He is taking his sweetheart along!'

'He thinks he is being received by Prince Sumana!'

‘This beautiful Princess may have Kama in her retinue.’

‘Shiva took away Kama’s body, now let Kama take care of his bow and arrows! If Shiva takes them away too, it could be that love will disappear altogether from India!’

‘And that Raja better be careful of his land and his daughter for she is to be the bait.’

‘Oh, poor Kansa. To placate the Maharajah! Kansa takes no chances. They say the Maharajah always wears a cloth of iron around his heart.’

‘They say he is Shiva; well, in that case he will not need it.’

‘People say so many things but everyone praises his righteousness. Woe to him who harms the laws of the country. I do not understand though why he still tolerates that host of priests in the Brahmin-court, when they are fomenting discontent everywhere. It seems they were the ones who instigated Kansa and in Kalinga, the King, too.’

‘Shiva laughs at their words. They had better take care! Chandaka has shown them the road that leads to the Ganga! What do Kansa or Kalinga think they can do against the army of the Maharajah! Prince Ashoka was a capable army commander, Raja Ashoka a brave warrior, Maharajah Ashoka a mighty ruler.’

Kansa had to wait another hour in the palace before Ashoka received him. The conquered king could hardly contain his anger.

‘Is your Maharajah so occupied that he makes me wait for more than seven days?’

Satyavat informed his Lord about the Raja’s comment. Kansa was led in, surrounded by heavily armed palace guards. The pomp and circumstance of the huge imperial court overwhelmed the Raja. He fell to his knees and bowed low and deep for the Maharajah, stretching forward his arms.

‘Is Raja Kansa so occupied that he makes the Maharajah wait for months for a token of respect?’

Kansa rose, astonished. ‘I would not have come if you had not forced me, mighty Maharajah.’

‘Raja Kansa of Anga has to pay tribute to the Maharajah of Madhyadesa.’

‘I did not know who was Maharajah here.’

‘Aha! Raja of Anga, please take note, nothing but the truth between us!’

‘I was told that you were not anointed, had taken the throne unrightfully, that Sumana and later Sumana’s son would be the successor. Why then had I to come to pay tributes to you!’

‘Now we understand each other. And you were happy to believe it was so and had thought that I would let an unwilling vassal revel in disobedience! You should know the Mauryas better, Raja Kansa! What if I were to wipe you out of Anga? And put one of my trusted men on your throne, you, rebellious Raja!’

Kansa again bowed to the floor as a sign of humility.

‘Sire, from now on I will loyally pay my tributes.’

‘And my costly armed campaign?’

‘Sire, I will pay you threefold.’

‘You have become a very willing Raja. But I can annexe your little kingdom to mine and appoint a rajuka whose loyalty I need never doubt. Not a single promise binds me any longer to you or to your court.’

‘Sire, I took along with me my most beautiful daughter. Take her as a guarantee of my loyalty.’ To his daughter, he said: ‘Karuvaki, help me to placate the Maharajah.’

Karuvaki stepped forward and looked at the Maharajah with her laughing, fiery eyes. She had enjoyed more freedom than was usually permitted to daughters of a king, because of her need to move freely; her courage and her cheerful, carefree attitude had amused Kansa. He had infinite admiration for her beauty, energy, and lust for life. She would even be able to charm the Maharajah! That was why he had taken her along! She was his shield that would ward off Ashoka’s wildness and bloodlust. He watched closely to see what impression she was making on the mighty and wild Maharajah. She was used to seeing young men, sons of high kings, at her feet.

Ashoka looked at the king’s daughter, apparently unmoved. Yet, he quickly considered what could be done. To turn the offer down would be an insult for which he would never be forgiven and thus would be forced to destroy the lineage of the Raja of Anga. To accept would mean to bind the Raja to him and against the Kalingas! Nothing of his inner struggle showed. Karuvaki fell to her knees. When the Maharajah still did not speak, her haughty smile faded, Ashoka’s cold glance causing her discomfort. She

folded her hands and bowed to the floor beside her father, disappointed. They waited for what the Mighty Emperor would decide.

‘Bring Karuvaki to the anthapura. You, Kansa, return to Anga and prove yourself an obedient tributary king of the Maharajah. Shiva will destroy you if I were to once again dispatch an army to Anga!’

‘Gracious Maharajah ... nothing shall break my loyalty to you. I will be your ally, whenever you wish.’

The Maharajah could barely tolerate that several rulers of tributary kingdoms did not consider it necessary to proclaim their dependence and loyalty to him, that many Vaishyas had to be coerced to pay their land levies, and that some traders considered any tax to be too high. Who was behind this, the Brahmin-court? What Brahmin-court! Was a crime committed by thousands still a crime? And were those to be frightened by the punishment of a few? And who was the guilty one, the individual or the multitude? The proper punishment! To let a few suffer, to inhibit many – that is injustice, Asandhimitra. But then, how? Benevolence, lenience, the providence. Until it is too late. No! Away with the delicate-blue scarf!

Satyavat came up to his Lord.

‘I have imprisoned one of the palace guards, O, Maharajah. She had brought some very poisonous whip-snakes into your bedroom. I have distrusted her as she is the sweetheart of the priest Sadha from the Brahmin-court. For some time I have been watching her. I saw that she received this vase from his hands and then brought it to your fourth bedchamber and emptied it onto your bed. I found one whip-snake yet in the vase. The others were killed by the slaves.’

‘Bring her here, Satyavat, along with five female guards; bring Sadha also to the palace.’ Ashoka could barely control his temper.

‘What did you wish to do with those snakes, Sarami?’

‘Nothing, O, Maharajah.’

‘Nothing, do you say! Why then have you brought them into my sleeping chamber!’

‘Because my beloved wanted me to.’

‘For what purpose did he wish it so?’

‘I do not know. You will have to ask him, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Does your oath oblige you to take care of the safety of the Maharajah?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘You endangered my life!’

‘No Sire, it was my beloved who did so.’

‘So, I will have your beloved killed.’

‘Sire, he did not bring the snakes.’

‘So, you deserve death. Who is your beloved?’

‘Sire, I am not allowed to say it.’

‘Satyavat, is this outcast Sadha the beloved of Sarami?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘I am no outcast, I am a Brahmin, Sire.’

‘Brahmin. You, a Brahmin! Is one who attempts to murder a reigning Maharajah, a Brahmin? You belong to the lowest of the caste of killers, outcasts, worse than the Chandalas. Your body will not be entrusted to the Ganga but destroyed at the judicial execution place!’

Two chakras infallibly reached their target.

Depressed, Ashoka walked over to the park in the enchanting magic of spring, where the blossoms of the *karnikara* and white jasmine smiled at each other and the flowers of the *kimsuka* swayed like mist in a morning’s breeze. He stood still, breathing deeply the fragrances spread by the *animukta* and *priyangu*¹. Kansa’s daughter Karuvaki ... She looks up at a flowering Ashoka tree with one luxuriant orange bouquet. She nestles her sprightly features into the cool, soft heads of the blossoms, picks a twig, holds it in front of her eyes, pondering. Ashoka sees the tears that moisten her eyelashes and quickly walks towards her.

‘Was the beautiful Karuvaki touched by the splendour of the Ashoka tree?’

‘Ashoka ... Sashoka, free of sorrow ... full of sorrow, O, Maharajah.’

‘How sorrowful is the beautiful daughter of Anga! Is the palace of the Mauryas not enough for the high Princess? Does she not like the park, the luxuriant flowers, and the lotus pond in the fresh colours of Vasanta? Is she not happy at evening time when Surya’s light disappears and Chandra’s white disc spreads his magic over this legend so she can enjoy the coolness of the lovely park in one of the extensions of the palace? Look at this wonder! Does the orange beauty that unfolds itself not charm Kansa’s

daughter when she touches it with her gaze, such calm in the world's hustle and bustle?'

'Calm, you say, O, Maharajah? In Anga you find calm in the heart, and in nature we look for excitement: rivers, woods, hunting. Here, the hundreds of towers of the black palisades look down upon you in quietude, but the heart beats in disquiet and sees no way out. In Anga, I ruled Father's palace with my laughter; here I shrink under the serious gazes of the anthapura. Is one always mourning here for some beloved who has passed away, mighty Maharajah? In Anga Surya rejoices, over here, he mocks!'

'Tomorrow we will have a hunt, my Karuvaki, to restore the heart's calm in the youngest Rani.'

'Hunt? My gods! I do not know if I will be able to sleep this night ... out of joy! I feel like a palm tree in Jyeshtha to whom one whispers that the first rain clouds appear, O, Maharajah. It is as though the park looks so much friendlier all of a sudden and the towers of the palisades crumble, mighty Lord!'

Ashoka immediately summoned Sagka and Satyavat.

'Sagka, tomorrow the imperial hunt will take place. Take care of the beaters, elephants, horses and weapons. Check the platform in the jungle. The sealing off of the route of the hunt has to be watched carefully by two rows of foot-soldiers. Satyavat decides who is to be allowed to join from the anthapura and which of the palace-guards are joining. Ask Tishia to come.'

Before the rising of Surya, the hunting party was ready. Several Princes, Princesses and Ranis, were seated on elephants or in the chariots. Tishia was in charge. Swift and impulsive in his movements, his demeanour radiated the joy of the decision of his brother and of the hunting party in the tingling early morning hours. At last, the young Maharajah and Rani Karuvaki came out of the palace into the grey light of the morning haze, whose soft mist wafted through the imperial park. Karuvaki had wrapped herself in pure white muslin; a large gold-yellow shawl, embroidered with jade and turquoise, fell over her head and was completely wrapped around her, to protect her against the fresh coolness of the morning. Jampa patiently waited with his light load.

'Come, Mahindra, are you not dressed for the hunt?' the Rani called out to Ashoka's half-brother.

‘Permit me to stay behind, beautiful Rani; I do not like the hunt.’

‘You do not know what you disdain, Mahindra!’

‘You do not know what you are committing, beautiful Rani.’

Kuravaki laughed. ‘Kautilya deems it useful; it chases away gloom, bile and fat. It trains the sharp eye and teaches us about the ways of the wild animals. He calls the hunt a sacred right of the Maharajah.’

‘*Ahimsa*, not to kill, is the sacred duty of the human being.’

The party started moving and proceeded stately through the awakening city. Startled by the stamping horses, the inhabitants rushed to see the imperial company and to greet it respectfully. It did not disturb the Maharajah that there were also many who went their way with impassive faces, seemingly unimpressed by the lively scene of male and female riders who were trying to keep their skittish horses under check behind the imperial elephants. When they had left the city behind, they moved faster along the route of the hunt that was marked by pennants and where rows of foot-soldiers were keenly on guard. Ushas painted with glowing red the cheerful hunting party. Karuvaki’s eyes were gleaming with happiness. When Ashoka looked at her, she smiled gratefully at him and could hardly control her limbs with the pulsing of her blood.

‘And the disquiet of your heart, my Rani?’

‘O, Sire, it is back to its usual steady beat! Only it cannot bear that I am sitting here so stately on the gold-plated howdah under the purple canopy!’

At the first hilltop Ashoka made them stop and all dismounted. The first sun rays, the Ashvins, shot along the eastern sky, Ushas opened the hazy veil and Surya rose slowly, in full splendour over the dewy meadows along the Son.

All bowed to its splendour. Kuravaki threw off her yellow veil and stretched out her finely shaped arms to the deity, as if to grasp the warmth that radiated on to a bared breast.

‘O, *Sun goddess,*
Queen of heaven and earth,
Thou, who gives us light,
Thou who gives us strength,
Holy, holy art thou!’

She knelt down and swiftly rose again.

‘Now, further on horseback, gracious Maharajah!’

‘Let it be as you wish, my Karuvaki.’

Her laughter reverberated over the jungle road, her arms and agile body moving rhythmically with the trotting horse. The high company maintained their unruffled faces but the Maharajah felt charmed by the spontaneous joy of this radiant jungle-daughter.

‘Anga, Sir! Now Surya rejoices!’ He laughed at her; his eyes drinking in the loveliness of her bubbling, youthful zest for life.

When they arrived at the field of the hunt she jumped off her horse, rushing ahead of the others to the platform. From all sides resounded now the calls, cries and tom-toms of the beaters. The routed animals dashed away, fearfully disappearing into the bushes, appeared again, stood still in the wide, open clearing, trembling desperately, sensing the danger that threatened their jungle.

The slaves brought out bows and arrows. Karuvaki was the first one to take a huge bow, place the arrow on the string, and pull. Ashoka saw how her face had changed, had become more energetic, how her eyes became fixed as they measured the distance to a young deer that had raised its head, as if seeking escape; suddenly the animal stumbled and fell. People cheered the shot; the female guards and army commanders followed her example and everywhere the animals that had been targeted for the game were felled: peacocks, hares, mongoose, deer. Nothing was spared. A wild boar, wild-eyed, rooted around restlessly, grunting fiercely amidst the frightened victims. Karuvaki drove her deadly arrows into its tough hide, without killing it. As if the animal understood from where the torment came it charged the platform, crashing into the poles, while blood from its wound coursed down its brown hair. The Rani recoiled for a moment; Ashoka hefted a chakra and killed the enraged boar with one throw. More and more animals were driven onto the clearing in front of the tall stand with the hunters, and more and more fell under the shooting on the killing-ground of the animals.

Suddenly, a slim figure appeared from the forest, a long, ashen-yellow robe enveloping his body, the left shoulder and arm lying uncovered. Straight and firm he strode along, now and then turning his face to the hunters, unconcerned about their arrows. An unutterably sad glance touched the Maharajah, who looked on in amazement at the calmness with which the bhikshu risked the flight of the arrows. He knelt down by a bleating

young goat that was lying on the grass, an arrow stuck to its wounded body and despair in its agonised eyes, its long neck arched over. Cautiously, the bhikshu removed the arrow that pierced the goat's body, staunched the flow of blood and tied a cloth around the wound. He lifted the moaning animal and brought it to the edge of the forest, where he laid it down lovingly. Then he looked for other wounded animals amongst the many corpses, easing their pain, bandaging them and whispering consoling words in their ears. All bows on the platform were lowered. Startled, everyone glanced at the Maharajah, because this audacious violation of the hunt could be punishable by death. A slave approached the bhikshu.

‘The Maharajah requests you, venerable bhikshu, to appear before him.’

‘Tell your Maharajah that the suffering of the defenceless ones demands the time of the bhikshu Kashapagotha.’

Unperturbed, the bhikshu continued his work, looking no more at the glorious company. A wounded young deer staggered up at his approach, wanting to flee, fell down again, moved away from his rescuer in great pain, and stumbled over the body of a peacock. Then a deeply-moved ‘Come here, Maithili’², struck him. The animal stood still, waited anxiously shaking for the tall human being. The bhikshu bent over it, stroked it softly, and took it cautiously in his arms.

At this moment the Maharajah stood by his side.

‘Do you not fear the arrows of the hunters, venerable bhikshu?’

‘Did you ask all these animals if they feared your arrows, O Maharajah?’

‘But you possess your manas to stay outside the hunt.’

‘So, these simple revelations of the Atman are doubly vulnerable: because they are not armed and because their manas does not enable them to stay out of the reach of the weapons, which you direct at them, safely armed, and from the safe height of your platform, hence doubly safe ... cheering, when your double invincibility strikes at their double defencelessness, O, mighty Maharajah.’

‘You, who violate the hunt of the Maharajah, dare reproach a cheering Rani her rightful happiness, doubly safe behind your monk's robe and your disregard for death?’

‘I do not reproach the boar his wildness, nor the arrow its speed, nor the lamb its suffering, nor the Rani her happiness, nor the Maharajah his lawful

hunt. But let me be as the Bhagavana, the Sublime One, as the one who lifts up what has fallen down, lays bare what is covered up, who shows the road to the one who has lost it, who keeps a lamp in the darkness, so that he, who has eyes, can see.³ May the mighty Maharajah be aware that he is the highest one in the world; that his high Majesty, hence his opinion, his attitude towards Atman and its unfolding are declared sacred, the highest in might and will. Either the material, or the spiritual, or the form-free conception of the own self, shapes the example for his subjects. But one of the three excludes the others.'

'Your courage is great, venerable Kashapagotha.'

'My compassion for the suffering of beings is greater, Sire.'

Ashoka beckoned a slave.

'Give the signal that the hunt is over.'

A black bear, provoked by the beaters, came charging out of the jungle and dashed with great speed towards the two men, then rose on its hind legs, attempting to crush Kashapagotha in its embrace. Ashoka's chakra flew to the animal's throat.

'The hunt was finished, O, Maharajah.'

'But not the protection of my subjects, venerable Kashapagotha.'

'I did not ask you for protection, Sire.'

'The idea, foolish bhikshu! To imagine that I, in my great empire, protected only those who asked for it! I will give you five slaves with unguents and pure materials to help you.'

'These helpless creatures, gracious Maharajah!' But Ashoka turned his back on him. The hunting party left. Karuvaki was seated in the howdah alone, swaying to the rhythm of Jampa's heavy gait. Ashoka, astride his horse, tarried awhile and, pondering, looked at the hunting fields. Kashapagotha, together with the slaves, carried away the last of the wounded animals. Black eagles soared in mighty circles high in the air. The surrounding trees were weighed down from the heavy host of ravens and vultures, which, called by the scent of blood, had come sailing from afar to the field. Like arrows they shot towards the booty that had been discarded by the Maharajah.

Towards evening, Ashoka walked through the park on his own, where the radiant Ashoka-tree stood. Ashoka, free-of-sorrow! Angrily he quickened his pace: all the blossoms beaten down, trampled around. The

tree with broken limbs, the broken branches pointing towards the sky as though they were wringing their hands. Hatred against the ashoka ... Ashoka? He sped to the house of Satyavat.

‘Rohini, who destroyed the Ashoka-tree?’

‘Sire ... some five women from the anthapura. When you were at the hunt.’

‘Who?’

‘Two Princesses, Jaloka and Vardani, and three others I do not know.’

Ashoka strode to the anthapura. His voice thundered through the halls.

‘All women from the anthapura, come to the big hall!’

Female slaves bustled nervously around with frightened faces, to warn all.

‘Who destroyed the Ashoka-tree in my park?’ A painful silence; no one answered. The Maharajah examined the faces, now taut with fear.

‘Jaloka!’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Who did you say?’

‘Yes, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Who else? Who else? Vardani!’

‘Yes, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Now the other three! In the name of Shiva!’ An incensed Ashoka grabbed his sword. A tremor went through the people present. Three women crept on their knees towards him and threw themselves before him. He raised the weapon. Subhadra came near.

‘My son, they are your kin.’

‘Now, however, I am the Maharajah, who does justice, Mother Subhadra!’

‘I beg the Maharajah for forgiveness for these poor ones.’

The sword was lowered.

‘Get five brooms. You shall sweep away all traces of your hatred. Vitri, send along ten guards. Those who refuse, you shall kill instantly, and have destroyed at the judicial execution place meant for criminals. This night, you five, will remain kneeling down before the bruised tree and pray to Shiva, you hear, to Shiva! Pray that he adorns in the night my tree with blossoms again. If it bears new blossoms tomorrow, know that Shiva, whom

you have deeply injured, has forgiven you. Now be gone!' Ashoka waited till all had left. Only Asandhimitra stayed behind.

'Your punishment is hard, Sire, and motivated by anger. If tomorrow there are no blossoms ...'

'Tomorrow the tree will have new blossoms, Asandhimitra, but such conniving in the ladies' quarters has to be ended.' he whispered.

'Thank you, Sire.' And she kissed his hand.

Ashoka had the purohita prepare an inebriating drink to be offered to the five sinners, after which he ordered Satyavat to plant in the night a flowering tree in the place of the old one, while the five were in deep sleep. The next morning, the Maharajah woke up the five inhabitants of the anthapura himself. They looked up in awe at the tree which glowed with a radiant orange in the morning sun. They fell on their knees before the Maharajah and bowed into the dust.

'Shiva has heard you. Remember, only once does he forgive such a sin.'

Ashoka walked up to Satyavat's house. Rohini stood in front of the door, looking moved.

'Rohini, why the sadness?'

'Sire, no sadness. Happiness that I met you in my life: you have the mildness of the *Tathagata*⁴. Come Asita, kneel down before the holy Maharajah.' But Ashoka lifted up the little girl, took her in his arms and looked at her. Asita laughed.

'Sweet, Rohini, is that your little child?'

'Yes, Sire, our third one.'

'The sacrificial priests are badly fooled by you.'

'Yes, Sire! Or, those ones must be right who call you an incarnation of Shiva.'

'That I do not believe myself, why should you then believe it, Rohini. Mildness, you said, of the Tathagata, but not the truth of the holy Buddha, Rohini.'

'In the deed there is often a deeper truth than in a true word, Sire.'

'Do you love Asita as much as your sons? Vaishyas only count their sons.'

'Sire, the Buddha allows us to love our daughters as much as our sons. That makes me happier than anything.'

‘Is that what the Buddha says? What a humane wisdom for Madhyadesa!’

‘Yes, Sire.’

Ashoka put down the little girl and took a precious ring from his finger.

‘Here, Rohini, keep this present for her till she is grown-up and beautiful like you.’

Rohini bent down and kissed the hem of his cloth.



JUNGLE FIRE

Ashvita left the Brahmin-court dressed in the vestments of a pilgrim. Anu hurried to the Maharajah.

‘Sire, the hostile priests had a meeting yesterday. They took painstaking precautions not to be spied upon. Ashvita has left just now even though Surya scorches the soil.’

‘Where to, honourable Anu?’

‘To the jungle road by the side of the Son, O, Maharajah.’

Ashoka had Maskarin come in and ordered him to follow Ashvita.

Towards the night of the second day, Ashvita reached the dwelling of a Vaishya whose farmstead extended into the jungle. He asked for hospitality. A poor penitent made his way towards the simple hut as well, but did not enter. The Vaishya felt honoured to render hospitality to a distinguished Brahmin and to take care of him. The scorching sun of Grishma had dried out the country, blowing burning gusts of wind towards the Ganga. The streams contained not a drop of water. The pippalas rippled their longings to the Maruts. At a time like this it was good to give the Brahmins a warm welcome. They were the only ones to determine the monsoon and coerce the Maruts to send rain to the earth.

‘Do the gods bless your labours, Purna?’

‘My land is dried out, the cattle becomes scrawny; the heat harms the farmstead, sir. If only the rain would come!’

‘Do you offer to Rudra and the Maruts?’

‘Daily, sir. If the rain stays away my farm will soon be without life.’

‘It may be the evil spirits. Do you always speak the truth, Purna? You know that no evil spirits can harm you then.’

‘The Vedas forbid the telling of lies, sir.’

‘Then listen to what the restless spirits of dead people whisper to you, Purna. They speak to truthful Vaishyas. You do not hear them but they whisper to your conscience what they want you to do. Where do you make offerings to the spirits, Purna?’

‘Yonder in the jungle, sir.’

‘Come on then, we will go together.’

They left the farmstead. The penitent had taken a seat close by. Purna and Ashvita greeted him respectfully but the penitent did not move. Ashvita and Purna reached the sacrificial place through various winding pathways; Purna knew that evil spirits could only travel by paths that are straight. Their path was covered with withered leaves. Trees and shrubs looked scorched and the vines hung leafless amongst the trees.

‘Do you perform your offerings to the gods here, Purna?’

‘No sir, we do that at home. Here there is danger of fire.’

‘But this is a sacred offering place.’

‘For the evil spirits, sir. Only for the evil spirits!’

‘Don’t be so frightened, Purna. Make the offering here to the god who rules over rain and wind. I am a Brahmin and will help you to get rain.’

‘Sir, I cannot ask Agni to bring the sacrifice to the gods from here. To light a fire in the jungle is forbidden and the penalty is death. The jungle belongs to the sacred Maharajah and is the home to an infinite number of animals, sir.’

‘There is no anointed Maharajah. Pray quietly and listen to what the gods whisper into the conscience of the true Aryan. Keep silent. Can you hear it, Purna? Agni and Rudra are asking for your offering. Here ... they yearn for your sacrifice! Now is the time to make the offering, Purna. The rains have to come. I protect the jungle! Bring the sacred fire from your home.’

Purna did not dare to resist the Brahmin any longer. When he passed by the penitent, he fell prostrate, and prayed earnestly, frightened. The penitent did not move. When Purna returned with the fire however, he said: 'Purna, you have taken the sacred fire.'

'Yes, sir, for the offerings for rain.'

'Think of the jungle, Purna. The trees, the animals.'

'Sir, a Brahmin is wiser than we are.'

'To light a fire in the jungle is a deadly sin, Purna.'

'I bring the holy fire to the Brahmin priest, sir.'

'The gods forbid fires in the jungle!'

'But the Brahmin is more than the gods, sir.'

'The fire threatens the country and the sacred Maharajah.'

'The Brahmin, sir.'

And Purna hastened away in mortal fear to the sacred place where Ashvita had piled up wood, leaves and dry grass for the offering.

'Sir, starting a jungle fire is a deadly sin! You threaten the holy Maharajah.'

'The Maharajah is not consecrated. He who took the land unlawfully, his land we do not threaten. Do you wish to start a jungle fire, or to make offerings, Purna? Do you wish rain from the gods or do you want to see how Surya burns up your possessions and those of all Vaishyas? If you do not wish to perform the sacrifice—as many others who now refuse to make offerings to the gods—then I will leave your farmstead immediately.'

'At my home, sir.'

'I do not know if your altar is sacred like this place. What do you want?'

'The offering, sir.'

'Then light the fire. I will take care of it while you bring the gifts.'

Purna saw with terrified eyes how suddenly the fire greedily snatched at the wood-pile and leaves and how the flames shot crackling through the wood and rose high up amongst the trees.

'Now get the rice and the ghee, Purna.'

Purna staggered over the twisting pathway, stumbling, because he kept looking back all the time. When he returned, it was too late. He took a big branch and beat at the flames that crept in all directions through dead leaves

and twigs. The Brahmin lay knelt before the fire and prayed. For what he was praying, Purna did not know.

‘Save your life, holy Brahmin.’

Ashvita stood up. The fire was spreading at an alarming rate and they fled to the farmstead.

‘Sir, deadly sin!’

‘I release you of all guilt, if you begin tomorrow a pilgrimage to the Amarakantaka in the valley of the Narmada.’

Meanwhile, the penitent sat motionless in the same place.

‘Sir, sir, the fire, the offering fire!’ The penitent did not move. But when the two were out of sight, he rushed to the road to Pataliputra. On the horse of a Vaishya he rode through the dark jungle and saw how the smoke behind him billowed up into clouds in the sky. The fire spread fast. The wind blew the smoke in the direction of the capital. Already, fear had driven the watchmen towards the moats and inside the watchtowers. With the billowing smoke, the heat became suffocating. The fear in the city grew: jungle-fire in the woods of the Maharajah! The smoke became thicker; up to far in the south rose the glow of the flaring flames. When Maskarin informed Ashoka about the disaster, the Maharajah sent a courier post-haste to Sela who sent thousands of warriors to the jungle with small swords, axes and water jars, to raze a wide strip of the wooded land and to try, as much as possible, to arrest the flames with water from the Sona. He also sent a thousand horse-guards to the city to calm down the inhabitants and to compel them to be compliant. Carpenters had to fortify the bridge over the Sona. All the exits of the Brahmin-court were blocked by the horse-guards and nobody could get in or out. The unrest grew. In fear of a great disaster, the people made for the temples, in order to reconcile with the gods. They called for the priests as the heat and smoke became unbearable.

Sela and his soldiers toiled. Trees were cut down, shrubs and vines uprooted. Ravens, vultures, black eagles, wood-doves and pheasants, fled the trees with fierce screeching, cackling, quacking and chirping, and flew in fright towards the Son. Hordes of insects scattered through the air. Wild goats, deer, bears and panthers, ran like they were possessed with vacant eyes through the lines of the hardworking soldiers. Monkeys, their babies suckling them or pressed into their arms, ran shrieking through the branches peering at the fire behind with frightened looks. Scorpions, spiders, frightful

centipedes and armies of startled snakes, terrifying cobras and pythons, alarmed the workers in the woods.

Sela, with his men, persevered. Could the fire be stopped in the dried-out woods? The Maharajah had announced that he wanted to reconcile with the Lord of Life and Death and to move him to save the city. For that, offerings had to be made in the Shiva temples. Ashoka knew as well as the priests that the monsoon would start in two days. But would it be possible to keep the fire outside Pataliputra that long? On the southern side he had stretches of wood and trees removed, houses pulled down. The next day an announcement was made: 'Tomorrow, Shiva will extinguish the fire!' But during the afternoon, the wind stirred up and drove ahead burning leaves, twigs and branches, which pushed the jungle fire to the north. A catastrophe was approaching the city. Sela had been able to check the flames only for a short time. Then the Maharajah advised all to get across to the other side of the Son. Tomorrow, Shiva would bring rain! Srigupta was summoned to the Palace. Sayana and Khallataka were also there.

'Where is Ashvita, venerable priest?'

'Sir, each Brahmin priest is free to choose his own path.'

'Why did you send him to the Sona-jungle?'

'I do not know where Ashvita went.'

'I will come to the rescue of your memory. Four days ago you held a secret meeting. What was decided over there? You know that the Maharajah has to be told of every important decision of the Brahmin-court.'

'Sire, we talked about the concerns of our varna.'

'Is a jungle fire the concern of your varna?'

'We feared a jungle fire, Sire.'

'More than in previous years?'

'Yes, Sire, and we thought it had become necessary to perform offerings to beg the gods for rain.'

'Why did Ashvita allow the sacred fire to be brought into the parched jungle by the Vaishya, Purna?'

'Sire, I was not aware of that. Maybe, Ashvita is not familiar with the dangers of an offering fire in the jungle.'

'And why did he send Purna away on a pilgrimage to Amarakantaka and the Narmada?'

'I do not know the motives of my friend Ashvita, Sire.'

‘Do you not think, Srigupta, that your priests are becoming a danger to the empire?’

‘It is a danger for the country when a Maharajah who is not anointed is reigning.’

‘And you pile up crime upon crime to make my subjects understand that!’

‘We defend the Vedas, Sire, which you do not hold in esteem.’

‘With lies, deceit, floods and jungle fires? You do not hold in esteem human creatures, only the desirous priests of your varna!’ To his men, he said: ‘Lead the venerable Srigupta back to the court.’

When Srigupta had left Kallathaka spoke: ‘I have asked the holy Sayana to support me in my solemn request, noble Maharajah. The ministers, and I, as the oldest one in the first place, would like to ask you to allow yourself to be consecrated as Maharajah. Unrest flares up continuously. Many Rajas and rajukas yield only to your military prowess. But within, they feel there is no Maharajah, because no one has been anointed. Sire, the consecration is the confirmation of the laws of the country, like Ushas’ appearance is for the day and like the thread ceremony recognises the Arya as Arya, and only the ceremony makes the pupil Brahmacharin.’

‘Noble Kallathaka, I do not respect the ceremony, because it will acknowledge the truthfulness of the essence, by the untruthfulness of the sacrificial priests. I will rule India to the best of my ability, keeping in mind the happiness of India, not my own. Does nature’s rejuvenation come—the beauty of flowers, the joy of all life—because of the ceremonies of the priests at the spring feast, or is it the essence of Vasanta? Are the laws of the country valid by the endeavours of all, along with me, or because of the ceremony of the consecration by priests who send twenty-four of their assassins after me? Neither I, nor the people, will gain by the ceremony of the anointment, which serves nobody but a small, merciless, power-hungry, selfish group from a varna that places itself above the one, who exactly wants to be the embodiment of the laws of our peoples.’

‘Those peoples want your recognition of their sacred laws, your acknowledgement of the truthfulness of their rights to peace and justice. They do not ask for the performers of the ceremony but for the age-old sacred way of becoming one with their law.’

‘You, Piyadasi,’ Sayana added, ‘think that he, who serves the doctrine for the sake of the doctrine, has died before his death. You are nodding, you are remembering the beautiful days in my hermitage. Then you will remember, too: he, who looks for truth, finds many truths. Is your truth the only one? The truth of a sacrifice—so I thought—is the connection to the elevated Atman. That one truth lives deep in every human being. Our days are days of uncertainty, of doubting the priests, which is not surprising, of seeking. Humanity cries out for direction. And then the Atman unfolds itself always in the one human being, the sara of all willpower. You want to be that human being, maybe you *are* that human being. But if by more than sixty gates, you enter the capital of your empire, by one gate only the secret inner-counsel chamber of the mighty Maharajah of Aryavarta. Through thousands of streams the heavenly water flows through India, but only through the holy Ganga it flows along Pataliputra. Through thousands of pathways the minds search for the truth out of many truths. Where, my Piyadasi, is the gateway through which you will lead them to the enlightened land? Is he who constructed the gate of importance or is it the gate itself? Are the guards of importance or the entrance to the blessed and vast regions behind it? It is you yourself who will choose the guards; it is you yourself who gives the code-word, my Piyadasi.’

Ashoka lowered his head. ‘Yes, holy Sayana. When Chandra will be full in the month of *Kartika*¹, I will be consecrated. But the two of you will be seated next to me, as a sign, that I accept the ceremony only in the way it is understood by my two great friends.’

In the night the fire reached the open space before the city and charred the palisades and towers, dried out by the burning sun.

Almost the entire population had left the city and dispersed itself along the right bank of the Son. Would Shiva protect their city? The Maharajah left the palace with Asandhimitra and told her how the fire had been started.

‘Well, these priests have lost their way, Sire.’

‘I dearly wish to cleanse the country of these fools.’

‘Sire, a lost one, one tries to lead back to the right path.’

‘And if they do not wish to be led?’

‘Then one forces them with a soft hand.’

‘And if they hit back at the soft hand and call it impure?’

‘Then you force them with a strong hand and a loving heart, like yours, Sire.’

‘Asandhimitra, you always save me from the road of uncompromising force.’

The Rani looked gratefully up at him. ‘The delicate-blue scarf, my Shiva.’

‘But a priesthood which is unscrupulous, like this one, is doomed to disappear, my Rani. How?’

‘In a way that is right for the Maharajah.’

‘Your trust in my indulgence is great, Asandhimitra.’

‘There is only one who can cope with such a heavy task, Piyadasi.’

The long rows of carriers who brought thousands of jars of water from Ganga and Son from hand-to-hand to the wooden city, were hampered by the unbearable heat and smoke. People understood that the city would soon fall prey to the fire. Helplessly they watched; the Maharajah, too. Towards the morning the first fire broke out at the high watchtower at the southern palisade. An hour later the flames crackled up along the watchtowers of the Sona-gate.

‘Sivi? Where is Sivi?’

‘Here, O, Maharajah.’

‘Bring a last great sacrifice to Shiva in the temple of the army camp.’

‘Sire, Gautama the Buddha has foretold of this disaster. He indicated three dangers for this city: fire, water and betrayal. His words do not go in vain.’

‘Bring a great sacrifice to Shiva! No animals!’

‘Yes, mighty Maharajah.’

The fire spread. The first groups of houses were lost in the flames. When the Asvins shot along the sky, followed by Ushas, the red morning sky looked dim in the glow of the fire; one could see on the southern side columns of smoke rising up everywhere. The fire-fighters struggled. The scorching sun, more merciless than ever, wrested away all hope. The priests, freed at last from the Brahmin-court, walked with their heads held high among the desperate crowd. No word passed their lips but their haughty look measured the crowd that, dismayed, was watching the disaster. The Maharajah had forbidden them to have their offering ceremonies so that was the end of Pataliputra! The winds blew harder, the

smoke-clouds grew bigger, the smiles of the priests hardened on their faces. The noise of the buildings falling down rumbled ominously from the city towards the people, who had fled. Why were the priests not allowed to perform offerings? The panic increased, the discontentment was manifest in their looks. Ashoka knew it was meant for him. Strength had to be maintained! Khallataka stood beside the young Emperor.

‘Would it not be better to have the offerings performed, Sire?’

‘Do those sacrifices bring rain?’

‘The people, Sire.’

‘No, my Khallataka, I wait for Ashavita!’

A wild shriek went through the people who had their eyes riveted on the burning city.

‘Shiva! Shiva! Shiva! ... There!’

From the south, a heavy lead-blue mass of cloud climbed slowly up into the sky, bolts of lightning shooting through it. Tears of joy filled the people’s eyes; hands rose up towards this godly sign.

‘Shiva! Shiva!’

Then all turned to the Maharajah, falling on their knees and bending their heads to the ground. Swiftly, the thunderstorm closed in; from afar a dark wall of rain approached, lashing its waters as a torrential cascade over the earth, smothering the fires. Flashes of lightning streaked like slivers through the downpour; the thunder reverberated and rumbled like the sound of the dole around the saved city and its imperilled people. But it was like the sound of a bonfire and the thundering boom of the festival drum.

Ashoka had tracked down Ashavita and Purna, and they were interrogated in a huge public meeting of the court that had been organised, in which they acknowledged their guilt to the people present. Ashoka condemned Ashavita to eternal exile from Magadha, while Purna was sent back to his farmstead. Bright and clear, Ashoka brought to light what evil deeds had come from the Brahmin-court through the years, what crimes were committed by Devaka, Shakuni, Chandaka, Richika, Sunasepha, and then again by Ashavita.

Ashoka’s power was established and yet he knew that in the darkness of their temples and in the intimacy of the families of the faithful people, the priests continued to work undisturbed: He ruled without the gods, was not

consecrated, had not affirmed the sacred laws of Madhyadesa and not strengthened the sacred ties with the Aryans. His power was founded, not on respect and awe for the sacred Maharajah, but on his fierce horse-soldiers. That worried the Emperor. Were the sharp eyes of the spies enough to keep the priests and their followers in check? After long consultations with minister Radhagupta, he ordered a 'hall of terror' to be set-up, a place of torture and fear, a hell, in which each criminal, and he who induced others to crime, would be executed, maimed, under the most horrible pains, drowned or burned, all under judicial decrees: the most gruesome threat for those who dared to violate the authority of the Maharajah. No varna could protect a man from this hell. Nobody knew the secret of what happened there, nobody was allowed to enter, or he would lose his life. Ashoka knew from experience that the legend would quickly take possession of this 'hall of terror'. Soon, the people let it be the dwelling of the most loathsome brute the human imagination could create: Tshand, the godless, Girika. As a child, his greatest pleasure had been to hurt, torture and torment innocent animals. When Ashoka asked him to become the executioner in his hell, Tshand Girika's parents had objected, but he killed them. In the hermitage of Kukkuta near Gaya, the priest Balapandita taught him all the horrible manners of torture the people had to suffer who were to be reborn in hell. Those indescribable pains Tshand Girika let the punished ones endure, the ones put in Ashoka's 'pleasant prison'. A Brahmin, sentenced to death by drowning, was drowned there in a pool of the most terrible impurity, called by Tshand Girika: 'the holy Ganga.'

Fear and terror spread through the town.

When the monsoon had passed and the flow of water had withdrawn itself unwillingly into the riverbeds, when nature adorned itself with the rejuvenating power of Sharad, the jasmines shot their white blossoms out of the bursting open buds, the paddy ripened, and the grain turned yellow, Pataliputra and the whole of Aryavarta, made itself ready for the consecration of the Maharajah. From every corner, Rajas, rajukas, pradesikas and high purushas with their beautiful retinue, came to the capital and offered the Maharajah gifts, the most precious that their country could offer. After four years of rule, they knew that the Maharajah would strike down without mercy any form of resistance against his power. Moreover, his team of informants—wisely disguised and thus able to penetrate the most intimate of relations—was organised in such a way that

all events of varying importance, every breach of the laws and orders, was known to the Maharajah; no one could even understand how. And now there was the hell!

The day before the consecration, Ashoka came up to Asandhimitra, who had also heard the horror stories of the hall of terror.

‘Sire, you have arranged a hell with all kind of terrors of the netherworld where Tshand Girika is the hell’s gatekeeper.’

‘Is Shiva not allowed to build a hell for his enemies, whom he himself should have killed?’

‘Sire, is that horrible fear for your hell to stop the subjects from evil? Or, did you want them to change their inner view?’

‘Asandhimitra, Shiva has a third eye. With one ray from that eye, he destroyed all life on the Meru, so that it became an endless barren rock. You do abhor people like Ashvita, do you not?’

‘Sire, only love and compassion can lead a man to relief and happiness.’

‘Love, you say, Asandhimitra! Shiva destroyed with one beam of his third eye the body of the love-god Kama, so that he, disembodied, has to shoot his arrows. One more folly of love and Shiva will destroy his bow and arrows, too. What then will remain of that love?’

‘Sire, do you, who wishes and promises a heaven for your people, tolerate a hell in your earthly palace?’

‘I did not wish it. The priests ...’

‘They are your subjects, too!’

‘Asandhimitra, I will whisper a secret in your ear that no woman knows yet. Listen: in India the hell exists only in the mind of the evil man. And nobody enters the ‘hell of Ashoka’, if the Maharajah does not wish it! And he has a delicate-blue scarf of fragrant muslin around his forehead and his third eye, Asandhimitra, and that tempers the look of the Mighty Maharajah to one of deliberation and a friendly disposition.’

Then, Asandhimitra, deeply moved, bowed before her Lord and spoke slowly. ‘I thank you, noble Maharajah. You told me once that I could return to the hermitage of my Father if I wished so. Now I would like to return to the valley of the Sarayu.’

‘Return, Asandhimitra?’

‘Sire, my father sent me to Pataliputra because he thought that I could contribute to the well-being of your subjects by softening the hardness in

your justice. Now I acknowledge my ridiculous weakness beside your great power. But what is more, now I can only feel for the well-being of the great Maharajah himself; for that my father did not bring me here.'

'Asandhi ... I feel strong in my army and in the power I exacted from Bindusara, but humanly weak and dependant in the deeper innerness of my being, that knows itself connected with the world soul, the Atman. Have you learned ... Say it to me now, Asandhi ...'

'To love you? Yes, my Lord ...'

'Then I take you as my Agramahisi², my Asandhi. Now my people and I need you more than ever.'

Ashoka raised her and took her in his arms.

'Sire, it is my greatest happiness to be allowed to be your Rani.'

'A hard battle, Asandhi!'

'Together with you, my Raja.'

When evening came, the pilgrim Brahmagupta appeared at the Brahmin-court, dressed in the clothes of a penitent and asked for lodgings for the night. He was brought to Srigupta, because the head of the court was taking care of the ceremony the following day.

'What brings the pilgrim Brahmagupta to us?'

'I have to talk to the Maharajah. Haryana is ruled by drought, famine and sickness.'

'Why do you not ask for help in Indraprastha?'

'They say there is only one who can and will help.'

'Tomorrow is the consecration of the Maharajah. The preparations take up all his time.'

'I know, but they say the Maharajah receives everyone all the time.'

'Then do appear tomorrow at the second kalakramein, after the consecration.'

'The people cannot wait for a day in Haryana. Take me to the Maharajah now.'

'It is impossible. Wait till tomorrow, Brahmagupta. Have a rest from your journey.'

'I do not ask for rest!'

The pilgrim was hastily led away.

Srigupta called for his friends. Some Brahmins led a young man into the meeting and whispered something in the ear of Srigupta.

‘Who are you?’

‘Sura, Sir.’

‘How did you come to the court?’

‘Sir, I wanted to see the anointment of the Maharajah. They said that Shudras would not be admitted into the park. Then I crossed the moat by swimming and climbed over the palisade of the park. I wanted to hide myself, to mingle with the other spectators tomorrow. I did not know I had entered the court of the holy Brahmins.’

‘You are a Shudra, thus impure. Get back. Who knows what kind of evil plans you had!’

‘Sir, I only wanted ...’ He was commanded to silence.

‘Who sneaks in secretly into the park of the Maharajah, could not have done so with good intentions. Who sent you here?’

‘No one, sir.’

‘Do you know there is the death sentence for this crime? Do you not fear Ashoka’s hell?’

‘Sir, I did not want to do any wrong!’

‘The gatekeeper will decide that. Warn the gatekeeper, Agnidatta.’

‘Sir, protect me! My mother, Sir! Have pity, on my mother, Sir! I only wanted to see the anointment!’

‘Silence, impure Shudra! How dare you ask for pity from the Brahmins? You are a danger for the Maharajah!’

The gatekeepers entered.

‘Imprison this Shudra. He sneaked into the park, crossing the moat and the wall.’

The gatekeepers dragged the Shudra along to the guardhouse.

‘The Maharajah owes us double thanks. Fate put a penitent and an impure Shudra in our hands. Tomorrow the Maharajah will be anointed. He wishes the Brahmins to be present. We will not resist any longer. It is time that we express our approval of the Maharajah, now he lets himself be consecrated according to the Brahmanical rites.’

‘Has the venerable Srigupta abandoned his courage?’

‘I see, we will lose our livelihood! For years we have tried to preserve Aryavarta from a disaster. The people are turning against us. Maybe, soon Ashoka will send us out of the Brahmin-court. Do you want to be a hermit or a sannyasin and wander around with the begging bowl? Or, do you prefer to stay here where riches come flowing in from all the regions?’

‘The offerings no longer supply great benefits.’

‘People dare to mock the Brahmins and our varna.’

‘The people lose their respect for the gods.’

‘Our dice have been rolling wrongly and we have put at stake our most important interest, the welfare of our varna.’

‘If the Brahmins, Khallataka, Sayana, Aruna, Kala and others had not sided with the renegade, the Wild Prince, then nothing would have been lost.’

‘What are you saying? They have realised where their interest lies! They have retained the respect of the people!’

‘The Wild Prince knew how to break our power with his tricks and his spies. If we had sided with him we would have been safe now.’

‘Devaka, Richika, Shakuni and other fools have harmed our varna in the most aggravating way.’

‘Who here dares to call the noble Brahmins, who defended our varna and the gods with their life, fools? Are you not ashamed? What did you do? Merely nodding: ‘Yes’. Demanding from others their lives for our sake! Where is Shakuni, where is Ashavita? Exiled! You are cowards that you even dare to make a single reproach to them! And even greater cowards when you bow tomorrow for the worst enemy of our varna!’

‘Does the brave Madhu not participate in the consecration tomorrow?’

‘No. I rather would have myself exiled, or be driven into the Ganga by the horsemen of the Shudra!’

‘What courage! Does that bring you bread and meat, clothes and pleasant housing? Or, did you earlier perhaps support Prince Sumana, to suffer poverty for him?’

‘Cowards like you sell your varna for a priest’s robe and a gift from a Shudra, whom you had pursued by others.’

Madhu, head high, left the meeting offended.

‘Keep silent, Brahmins. If you wish to save your varna, then side with the Maharajah. Tomorrow, he bows down to the yoke of our varna. It is the

Asvins and Ushas of the rising Surya. Let us turn to the rising sun! And let us gather whatever we can of his light and power. Maybe, one day we will have more than what he has left. The court houses a penitent who has a request to make to the Maharajah. The Prince has a special fear of penitents! It would be good if he were to try to inveigle his way towards the Maharajah during the anointment ceremony and we Brahmins were to stop him. The Maharajah will regain his trust in the court that way. Each one of you must understand now that it was only the delay of the anointment that was our objection against this Maurya. The anointment by the priests makes him the sacred Maharajah!’

‘The anointment by the priests makes him the sacred Maharajah,’ all murmured.

‘The new Maharajah enjoys our protection!’

‘The new Maharajah enjoys our protection!’ Came the echo once again.



THE SACRED MAHARAJAH

The gleaming morning-sun of Sharad illuminated a radiant and brilliant scene. Under the huge verandah stood the ivory throne of Aryavarta, and a second one with gold embellishment. Next to them, on either side, were the seats of Sayana and Khallataka, and behind the one for Tishia. To the left the residents of the Anthapura were seated on the extended platforms of the palace, behind them the Rajas, rajukas and the purushas, from every corner of Ashoka's empire. To the right sat the Brahmins of the court, proud in bearing and appearance, and looking on over the others, who had to see the priests as the ones who gave the godly power to the Maharajah. In front, two offering altars had been constructed, one for Brahma, with exits on all sides and one for Shiva with an exit towards the setting sun. Behind the altars were gathered the huge multitude of people. Ashoka and Asandhimitra were sitting at the kusha-grass in front of the palace. The offering-fires were burning. Sivi brought in, one after another, golden bowls with rice, burned in the sun, white flowers, clods of earth, gold, silver and precious stones. Ashoka touched them: that was the confirmation of his sovereignty over food, nature, land and the treasures of the empire, after which came fire, milk, clear honey, leaves and twigs of holy trees. He touched them as confirmation of the sacred values of the country. Then the offering ceremony started. Shivi led the solemn ceremony. The hotars

invited the gods of Aryavarta to be present, and to take their places on the kusha-grass; the udgatars chanted the samans, and the advaryus brought the offerings to the sacred fires. At last, the five purifying products of the cow were brought in golden receptacles. A tiger skin was spread out. Ashoka and Asandhimitra knelt on it, bowing their heads to the ground. Sivi, in full regalia, threw a little of the liquid over their bare heads. Then the ablution took place with water from the holy Ganga, from the holy Manasa-lake and the hallowed Narmada. Sayana and Khallataka came down from their prominent seats, to lead the Maharajah and the Agramahisi to their thrones, where the white parasol was spread over their heads as a sign of imperial dignity. The last mantras resounded and then all knelt down and prayed for the now sacred Maharajah and the Maharani. The priests blessed them and felt themselves to be the gods over Emperor and subjects.

The velvet sounds of the veena permeated softly through the prayers, the strings of a ravanastha sang songs of Bhairavi, proper for Sharad. Flutes mingled their lilting airs into the ensemble. Kettledrums appeared to swell up from afar. Lovely, timid, and graceful as the deer, the melodies gambolled over the moved spectators. When the music stopped, the conches and the heavy *dhhol* resounded. People assumed that now the court-singers, the bards, would sing their songs of praise of the Maharajah and his ancestors, but Sayana got up from his seat. He felt, with what difficulty Piyadasi endured this ceremony. He raised his hand and immediately all fell silent, impressed by the revered figure of the great holy man.

‘Ashoka Maurya,

‘The highest Atman, and thus included the gods and the peoples of Aryavarta, have endorsed to you the throne of Aryavarta this day.

You believe that an iron law of cause and effect is ruling the world. Therefore, there must have been a great cause that has led you to this holy throne;

You have learned that one has to guide all life towards tranquillity, kindness, human tolerance and love: May the Atman unfold in you this quiet, kindness, tolerance and love;

You have learned that selfishness and deceit lead to destruction and hell, so to maya, and self-sacrifice and love to truth and harmony, and thus to divine unity. May You, sacred Maharajah, be the divine truth and harmony itself;

You know that one, who serves the doctrine for the sake of the doctrine, dies before his death. You are now the living ruler of Aryavarta. May you serve the doctrine for the sake of igniting the will towards goodness, in every seeking soul;

You now hold in your hands the power, to enforce justice, from your employees and subjects. You are justice itself.

All of us, you, your Anthapura, the Brahmins of Pataliputra, the Rajas, rajukas and purushas of your empire, and the people of Aryavarta, have made the offering, and have thus acknowledged the bonding of all to the highest, the supreme Atman, the awareness that all life is out of the intrinsic foundation of the All-one, and thus is mutually connected.

‘Be, my friend, Devanampiya, that is, the beloved of the gods, be Piyadasi, that is, he who views everything with kindness. In your hand lies Shiva’s disposition, Lord of life and death.

Hail Devanampiya!

Hail Pyadasi!

Hail our sacred Maharajah and the Agramahisi Asandhimitra!’

Like stormy gusts that start the fertile monsoon, the cry echoed itself through the lines.

Ashoka stood up. Suddenly, every sound seemed to blow away, as everyone waited to hear his voice. It was as though everything submerged and only he was elevated. Powerful and moving, in complete simplicity, it sounded: ‘My subjects! All people are like my children. And as much as I wish for my sons and daughters that perfect health and happiness may be bestowed on them, both in this world and into the next, so much do I wish for all the people, too.’

Of course, he was the embodiment of Shiva, the Lord of all life! Therefore, all were his children! ‘Hail Ashoka!’ ‘Hail Ashoka!’ ‘Hail Shiva!’ ‘Hail Shiva!’ ‘Hail Asandhimitra!’ Nothing could hold back the emotions; many sobbed. The people knew that the throne of Magadha was taken by the mightiest king that ever reigned over the Aryans, the embodiment of Shiva, Lord of Life and Death. The people were caught in wild rapture. Even the Brahmins seemed pleased with the Maharajah!

Then, Khallataka stood up and again all sound hushed.

‘Today our sacred Maharajah appoints his brother Tishia, as the Uparaja. In his absence, he will be the regent. He will be worthy of your

obeisance.'

With this the ceremony was over. From afar a penitent approached, bareheaded, a frayed length of cloth covering his loins, one end of which was draped over his left shoulder. His rough beard and dishevelled, long straggly hair hung in strands over his back and shoulders. The thread across his chest¹ indicated that he was a Brahmin. When people noticed that the holy one was walking towards the Maharajah, they became attentive. Ashoka distrusted men in the cloth of a penitent. Just when he wanted to make a sign to Satyavat, a few Brahmins came down the verandah, took the penitent in their midst and forced him to return to the court. One of the priests addressed the Maharajah.

'gracious Maharajah, he is the penitent Brahmagupta from Haryana and wishes to speak to you. We did not trust his intentions and induced him to return to the Brahmin-court.'

'Nobody knows better than you and me, that it is not the cloth that makes the penitent, venerable Agnidatta. But I wish to look after the interests of my people in all places. It does not please me to delay issues which concern the subjects of my empire. What does the penitent want? His message must be urgent.'

'Sire, I do not know. We have taken him away for the sake of the safety of the holy Maharajah. For the same reason, we handed over a Shudra to the gatekeepers yesterday. He had crossed the moat and the wall and entered the court.'

'I thank the venerable priests for their concern. Satyavat, tell Brahmagupta that he is to appear before me immediately.'

'Who are you, Brahmagupta?'

'A yogi from Haryana, gracious Maharajah.'

'A yogi? Does a yogi deem it necessary to leave his place of meditation and undertake such a long journey?'

'Lord, I did not consider it necessary for myself but for the people of Haryana.'

'I feel even more surprised, Brahmagupta. Which yogi regards the interests of insignificant people as of more importance than yoga for his own soul!'

'Lord, the situation in Haryana is so bad that I had to take a respite from my meditations.'

‘Then you are a great man, Brahmagupta, because you sacrifice your own salvation for the sake of others. By that decision you have infinitely enhanced your karma.

‘Lord, nor was that the reason for my coming. Haryana was first ravaged by a flood after which the newly built homes were destroyed again by storms, and then a south-west sand-storm wiped out all the harvest and supplies. There is famine now, and plague, and smallpox is spreading. Indraprastha, Mathura and Prayaga do not wish to provide rice to the thousands of hungry people. They do not wish to give medicines anymore because there will not be enough supply left, if they themselves were to be in need of it. They do not even want to let us enter the gates of the towns. The misery of the many thousands is so great that I left my station under the *pippala*² and undertook the journey to Pataliputra with a Ganga skipper.’

‘You have just arrived?’

‘No, Sire, yesterday.’

‘Why then did not you see me yesterday?’

‘In the Brahmin-court, they said that I could not speak to you because of the preparations for the consecration.’

‘How do you explain that, Agnidatta?’

‘Sire, it is as Brahmagupta says. Moreover, Haryana lies within the larger territory on the other side of the Sarasvati, Sire. The cities along the Ganga have rightfully refused their help.’

‘Rightfully, you say, Agnidatta! Are the inhabitants of Haryana not the revelations of the Atman, like you and me? All people, Agnidatta, are my children! Do you want to be in charge of the rescue work, Brahmagupta?’

‘Sir, I am a yogi.’

‘In this incarnation, neither you nor I have the time to take care of our own salvation. Let us do it together in the next, Brahmagupta.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

Ashoka immediately gave his orders for the rescue of Haryana by sending medicines, physicians, and grains.

‘People, from whom sacrifice is asked, my Brahmagupta, can think little of their own salvation. Or, that must indeed, be their salvation! Who knows what the great Atman intends! Consider this, though, the way one wants a good caretaker to watch over the well-being of his children so I ask you as

the highest purusha³ of the Maharajah in Haryana to be the protector of all, from Brahmin to Mletcha. Do you know what that means, Brahmagupta?’

The penitent bowed deeply before the holy Maharajah.

‘My Khallataka, ever since the fire, we wish to keep the jungle, as far as we can, at a distance from Pataliputra because of the danger of fire. Well, we shall reshape a widened area south of the capital into a nursery for medicinal herbs and plants, which will be always available for the entire empire, when others refuse help.’

The guests withdrew to the reception hall where Ashoka offered them the most precious gifts especially wrought by goldsmiths, ivory-carvers or workers on precious stones. A special hall was arranged for the priests. They accepted the offered valuables as a favour, done by them to the Maharajah. The spectators in the park rushed home to pick flowers and all gathered along the great Emperor’s Road, where the procession with the Maharajah would pass by. Garlands of jasmine, *rajanigandhas*,⁴ and marigold flowers connected the poles that had been fixed and which were decorated with the most colourful orchids and huge flowering creepers.

Seated in the golden howdah on the back of the elephant Jampa, Ashoka and Asandhimitra, surrounded by Sela and his horsemen, then drew near. They were followed by the women of the anthapura, Princes and Princesses, and after them, the richly dressed guests from the empire, from Gandarva to Anga, from Nepal to Dakshina⁵, seated on elephants, camels, horses, all just as richly dressed. Many priests joined, seated on the elephants from the imperial camps. Sandalwood powder was strewn abundantly, rose water from Iran sprayed on the roads. When Jampa with the royal couple passed by, thousands bowed reverently. A sea of flowers thrown everywhere on the road or poured down from galleries and windows, offered their radiant and fragrant joy to the sacred Maharajah.

‘Is my Lord gratified by so much joy?’

‘This joy would have been shown to any Maharajah. Sumana, too. I allowed the anointment to be done by Sayana and Khallataka but hundreds of sacrificial priests have come, with pride in their bearing and looks, to take before my people credit for the anointment, as an acknowledgement of their foolish delusion.’

‘Your deed is the truth, their pride the lie. The priests found the way to your might, but the peoples the way to your heart, my lord.’

By the side of the road there erupted a commotion. A woman from the lowest varna pushed herself, crying loudly, through the startled crowd, which gave way so as not to be contaminated. Two soldiers grabbed her. 'Let go of me, I want to see the Maharajah! Let go of me! My son! You can beat me to death!'

Ashoka signalled for the procession to pause.

'Bring the woman here.'

'Sire, she is a Shudra.' Ashoka did not respond.

'What do you want, woman?'

The Shudra fell to her knees. 'Holy Maharajah ... let me be killed. My son will be executed and I wish to follow his sinful soul and watch over it. After his death, too! Lord, Sura had slipped into the park furtively yesterday evening to see the anointment. He was picked up in the garden of the Brahmin-court and now he will be executed. Lord, kill me, kill me! Let the elephants trample me, Lord! O, Holy Maharajah, he is a Shudra. And a Shudra is punished harshly!'

'Take this woman to the gatekeeper and give her back her son. Tomorrow in the fourth kalakramein of the day, he will appear in the palace.' The woman wanted to throw herself out of gratefulness onto the dust before the Maharajah, but in a twinkling of an eye she stood outside of the surprised crowd. Then she rushed to the gatekeeper.

'Do you want to put him on trial tomorrow, my Lord?' Asandhimitra asked.

'No. He did not want to do any harm. I was informed about him. The Brahmins thought they could use him to show their care for me. Maybe ... Revata was also a Shudra ...'

*

Late in the afternoon four soldiers departed from the palace. The festivities for the people on the occasion of the consecration vibrated through the city and they wanted to participate in the shared joy. They ate the honey-cakes that were offered to the merrymakers, stayed in tents where strong drinks, made out of rice and sugar cane, were sold in agreement with the city government. They watched snake-charmers and magicians and finally arrived at a place where animal-fights were being organised. They witnessed how quails, rams and cocks fought and maimed each other till

they bled, while the numerous spectators cursed, laughed or cried. There was a fight of wild buffaloes, too, goaded to fury by invectives and beating by the owners or slaves. The more violent the fighting, the more the excitement grew, and it burst out insanely when one of the animals charged into the other so that its body was ripped open; the scene generated screaming laughter. The four soldiers looked in more amazement at the raging crowd than at the furious animals. The wounded animal had sagged down to its knees and made attempts to lift itself up again, bellowing woefully all the while. The victor itself seemed confused and some servants chased it swiftly to an opened enclosure. The wounded animal looked around in despair. It was approached with sticks and whips; they beat it again and again to push it forward, but its terrible condition made it impossible for it to move. The excitement turned to laughter and mockery at the desperate attempts of man and beast. The buffalo looked around with childlike frightened eyes, helpless, and started bellowing, which sounded like a cry for mercy. More severe beatings battered its skin. One of the four soldiers jumped over the balustrade.

‘Away, you!’ The tormenters flew apart nervously because of the expression of his eyes. A chakra glimmered in the fading sunlight and flashed into the neck of the animal. A blood-fountain erupted. Then the beast sank down.

‘Bring the chakra here! Clean it!’ A jump and he was on the other side again. Silence ... The four of them left the site. Only after two wild dogs had entered the arena did the voices return.

Acrobats, young and old, enjoyed the agility and prowess of the artists. Silently the four watched like the other spectators. There was so much certainty and precision in their movements that they hardly caused any excitement, until a young girl, Suryavarcassa⁶, barely an adult, dressed only in a short skirt and a light covering around her young firm breasts, climbed up a ladder at one of the two poles, between which an iron bar was fixed. She had the soft, luscious figure of a mixed Aryan race, the limbs well filled, a sweet serious face with soft curling hair and dark eyelashes. Her movements were gentle but sure. While she climbed, she aroused the mockery of some richly dressed young men, which caused laughter. It ceased when she put her foot carefully on the bar and walked over to the other side. Now she back-tracked, paused in the middle, lowered herself onto her haunches, rose up slowly again, gracefully balancing herself with

her arms and hands. She came down the ladder, took a small girl on her back and climbed up again. Some folded their hands and prayed, shivering in rapture and support for the brave young girl.

‘What if they fall!’ the chakra-thrower called to the leader Bhadra.

‘No problem! I have more girls who can perform this act.’

Just then Suryavarcassa placed her foot on the bar and walked up and down the bar, seemingly calm. She did not squat down in the middle, but lifted, with utmost caution, the little child from her back onto her arm, while moving, as though she was gliding through the air, and then turned back on her dangerous walk, cheered by all.

When Suryavarcassa climbed the ladder again, Bhadra followed her, blindfolded her eyes and then wanted to bind her arms to her body. The fierce chakra-thrower jumped up. A second rider put his hand upon his arm.

‘You did not want to intervene, Sire!’ But furiously he cried to Bhadra: ‘I forbid this!’ Bhadra did not look up but went on unperturbed. Incensed, the chakra-thrower snatched up his weapon, and threw it with amazing precision at the rope that fixed the bar to the pole, so that it slipped off. Then a whistle-signal was heard. Some five soldiers shot forward.

‘Lead Bhadra immediately to the Maharajah. Come!’ The onlookers did not understand the connection. The four riders disappeared amongst the boisterous people, who were in great excitement. They cried, questioned, looked, yet no explanation could be found. A drunken man smiled mawkishly: ‘Shiva. It is Shiva with the chakra!’ Of course! Shiva, the Lord of all life. Shiva with the chakra! The story spread through the town like a blazing jungle fire. Shiva, who even protected the artists without rights. Shiva, gracious me ... the Maharajah!

‘Who allowed you to place Suryavarcassa in such mortal danger? You did not leave her with any means of avoiding danger.’

‘gracious Maharajah, she belongs to me and I have been permitted to give the show.’

‘You kill the girl to earn gold.’

‘She is a Chandala, Sire, so is without rights.’

‘You are an acrobat and so as much without rights! How many girls were killed at your shows?’

‘Only five, O, Maharajah.’

‘Only five! From this day on, no one in my empire will be without rights anymore. You will not dare again to risk the life of your servants. If, due to you, there will happen again one more accident, I will bring you to my hell, Bhadra!’

‘Yes, Sire.’

In a meeting the next day of viceroys, Rajas, rajukas and purushas, in the great Council Hall the Maharajah addressed them:

‘I wish you, governors of the departments of my empire, to know, no human being, neither Chandala nor Mleccha, will be without rights in the future. Each sentence by our judges should be based on justice, never on varna. Therefore, each death sentence needs your agreement. My envoys shall impart to you my views ...

‘... At folk-festivals, for accidents occurring from performing dangerous arts, the leaders of the group will be punished ...

‘... Animal fights will be restricted because they coarsen the people ...

‘... The gains of land-fees and tax on buying and selling has to be brought into accordance with the norms as indicated in the *Arthasastra*. I want order, truth and honesty, in my empire. You and I have to set an example ...

‘... It is not the size of your domain that will determine its importance and my benevolence, but the justice and righteousness of your governing.’

Early one morning, a group of priests proceeded to the reception hall of the Maharajah.

There, they met a palace guard who had weapons close at hand. None of the priests displayed his emotion or anger; silently and gloomily each took his place. At the appearance of Ashoka and Tishia, Srigupta strode forward, greeted in a brief ceremony the mighty Maharajah, and chanted the morning blessings.

‘I thank the gods who, through your voice, venerable Srigupta, brought me and thus my people, the best of promises for the new day. Hail, Shiva, that he may support life.’

‘Holy Maharajah, the Brahmin-court has wanted to restore a good and venerable tradition in the Maurya court: the morning-blessing⁷ of the priests. You receive us, the holy priests of Brahma, with an armed palace guard.’

‘The venerable Srigupta will appreciate that the Maharajah would rather not take up his chakra himself when his subjects wish to surprise him.’

‘It does not seem to be a surprise for the mighty Maharajah.’

‘No.’

‘Then you would know, too, that the Brahmin-court is seriously striving for a good relationship with the anointed Maharajah.’

‘But I could not know whether a Devaka, a Shakuni, a Lamba, a Hasta or one of the twenty-four, is hiding himself under a useful priestly dress.’

‘So, the holy Maharajah does not appreciate the priestly blessing!’

‘I will value and accept with pleasure your friendship, venerable Srigupta. But as far as some of your friends are concerned, I have to take some precautions, as you, who are since four years the chief of the secret council in the court, in the first place should understand. I hope that the holy priests of Brahma will accept a new cloak from me.’

The Maharajah felt it comforting that he now was declared holy by his people; the priests, meanwhile, boasted that he had received his consecration from their hands. There had come a balance, which brought a certain calm, time to reflect. Whoever amongst the priests had adapted himself to the power of the ‘Wild Prince’, felt the ambition to, at least, regain his old place. But inside the Maharajah burned the desire to continue his difficult, barely marked-out path. His restless thoughts worked their way towards an all-encompassing picture, which was continuously moulding itself in his mind, from which his every action already emanated. Many knew him, the way he often stood, contemplating on the Ganga ... the image of eternity in its ever-flowing stream, of transition in its constant emptying of itself into the ocean, of eternal rejuvenation, by its source in the Himalayas. Sayana would say, the impelling life, the merging in the All-spirit, the eternal rejuvenating in the rebirth. Again and again, he discussed with Sayana what had motivated him and had to motivate him. Then he crossed the Ganga by ferry and went to the hermitage in the Areka-palm forest, where they, as in the earlier days, reflected upon their viewpoints about the peoples.

‘Only one will be—may be—able to find the way to the hearts of the peoples of India, to take away its greed and to purify it, Piyadasi. For a long time you have possessed the strength, now the power, and the love. You will have to walk that path in solitude.’

Or, he discussed with Khallataka which measures to take. 'The world is waiting in deep confusion, which can only be destructive, for a man who will show it a new direction. They wait for you, O, Maharajah.'

He had Kullika return from Vidisha. Kullika knows only one path, that of the Buddha: no varna, ceremony or intellectualism, but purity of heart, benevolence and compassion for all that lives, the purification of heart and senses. It is the way out of suffering. The impure ones, the despised ones, the cursed ones, the Buddha called them to him with compassion and love. No sacrifices of the living, no killing, or war. The Buddha condemns it with four words: 'Thou shalt not kill.' The spirit of happiness for each and everyone is the spirit of love and goodness: 'Whoever wants to remedy the disposition of the peoples has to encourage their kindness, to rein in their greedy desires, O, Maharajah.'

'Then I will not get there, my Kullika!'

He struck the gong. 'Jala, lead Maskarin in.'

As soon as Maskarin arrived, he was asked: 'Inform us about what you discovered in Kalinga.'

'Holy Maharajah, I discovered that the Kalingas are preparing for war. The strength of their military was reported to you as sixty thousand foot-soldiers, a thousand horse-soldiers and seven hundred elephants. As it is now, it is certainly three times that. Its leaders from Pataliputra teach the people, that to die for the King of Kalinga brings the highest blessing after death because only in Kalinga the gods are revered and receive the right offerings. More and more men are trained for the war.'

'For what purpose, Maskarin?'

'The governors and the people keep a greedy eye on Anga and the rich countries of Magadha and Videha, which are called Sumana's empire. They have given up on Nigrodha. But they still place their trust upon the many enemies of your new faith, Sire. They whip up the minds of the warriors: no pity for the enemies, no forgiveness that is weakness.'

'And the king?'

'He calls himself the friend of the killed Prince Sumana.'

'You can go, Maskarin. Well, Kullika, if I respect: 'Thou shalt not kill' from the Buddha, then they will kill us. Is that why I became Maharajah? I have to arm myself so there will be no chance of their victory. Against the discord in my empire, I wish to seek the *sara*, the essence of all religions.'

That must be with what the Atman unfolds itself in the human being, the right law, the principle, that is eternally valid. In my empire live peoples with many religious faiths, sublime like the Vedanta of the Brahmins, wild like the *tantra* of the forest-peoples. In the sara, everyone will recognise his own endeavour, the unfolding of the All-spirit. If that were to be recognised, then the people will meet the religion of others with forbearance, with the way I myself wish to meet it. Then we will establish the Dharma, which will be respected as the right Law of my empire. The Uparaja, Tishia, will be in charge of this great investigation. Sayana and you Kullika, will be his advisers. The most truthful and the best of all sects and religions will cooperate, so that we may find a Dharma for all the people, from the East to the West, which does not divide but unites.'

Dynamic in his decisions and measures as ever, the following day instructions were already given to arrange a separate building for Tishia. There the Dharma-mahamatrya of Ashoka was to be housed with a staff of the most able lipikaras.

Tishia and Kullika had worked for two years with lipikaras, informants and courier-purushas, to get an overall view of all religions and sects in the great empire when, one day, Ashoka asked his guru to come in.

'My Kullika, Agnibrahma, who has made himself very useful in the Dharma-department, will soon bring the investigations to an end. My son, Mahindra, is sixteen years; it is about time that he came to Pataliputra to be initiated into matters of governance. Vasumitra wishes to be relieved from his post as Viceroy. Kesala, too, wishes to follow his spiritual vocation. Would you bring Mahindra here from Vidisha? Make Devi see that it is necessary.'

'It will be difficult for the Maharani to let her son go!'

'Sons are not there to be cherished by their mothers.'

'There is a deep inner bond between the Maharani and her children. And Prince Mahindra has a tender heart.'

'It will be fortunate if he has also the power to control it. I had promised Devi to let him stay in Vidisha till he was sixteen. That time has now passed, my Kullika. Can Agnibrahma spare you?'

'Agnibrahma is capable, diligent and as truthful as the Buddha.'

Ashoka beat the gong and had his nephew come in.

‘Agnibrahma, Kullika leaves for Vidisha. You will take over his work.’

Agnibrahma looked from Ashoka to the priest. ‘I do not know, gracious uncle, whether I am able to do so. I am still studying the western provinces. Data and information about Yavana, Darada, Pankanada, Bhils and Rajputans are finally available to me now.’

‘And what is your first impression?’

‘That in almost all provinces over there, the Shiva cult is developing strongly, where the Lord of life and death shows up under the names: Shiva, *Kaleshvar*⁸ or *Mahadeva*⁹.’

‘In what countries?’ Kullika asked.

‘In the Punjab, Kashmira, Kabul, in Ujjain, the Deccan¹⁰, Dakshina¹¹ and Gondyana¹².’

Startled, Kullika looked up at the Maharajah. Remarkable! Those were the countries where Ashoka had been working, and was revered as army commander, viceroy, and where his helping hands had stretched out towards the distressed peoples.

Ashoka understood immediately Kullika’s fear. ‘The almighty Shiva, Lord of life, supports the powerless Buddha, my Kullika.’

‘... If the power-hungry priests do not change the Lord of all life into the Lord of death, who wears a garland of skulls. They create themselves a hell that grows more gruesome, the more their lust for power grows.’

‘Or, does the hell burn inside the evil man himself and should the fuel be removed first to smother the torturing fire, my Kullika?’

‘The clear, simple teaching of the Buddha,’ Agnibrahma thought, ‘works without a hell, and actually without a heaven, even without god; Brahma has become a pale figure with the Buddhist, in eternal rest, far, far elevated above the earthly world. I found this parable in which the Buddha clearly expresses for what he has come. Once the monk Malunkya putta goes to the Tathagata and asks whether the soul is different from the body or not, whether or not the world is eternal and infinite, and whether there is life after death. He urges the Buddha to answer these questions, with affirmation, denial or ‘I do not know.’ Thereafter, he would be ready to stay with the Buddha as his follower. Otherwise, he would turn again to a worldly life. But the Buddha answered with a parable:

‘A man is hit by a poisoned arrow; his friends call for a doctor. Should he say now: I do not let the arrow be removed from the wound before I

know exactly who is the man by whom I am hit, what is his name, his lineage, his varna; how does he look, is he small, is he big, is he dark, is he fair, where does he come from, and before I know exactly what kind of bow it was with which he shot, of which wood the arrow was made that wounded me ... the man would have died before he could be cured'...

It would be the same, when someone would make his entering the Sangha dependent upon these questions: He would die before the Tathagata could answer these questions¹³.

What is more important is the removal of the arrow, the curing of the wound. For his salvation, man is dependent on himself. Within himself he has the power to proceed on the road to Nirvana. It is a beautiful teaching that creates no fear of hell, nor does it beg favours from the gods, or buy them off with precious sacrificial-blood or priests' fees, but it does recognise the human will and the human power as the most precious gift with which to fight for purification of his soul, until it is standing in the impeccable white gown.'

'That is a beautiful doctrine, Agnibrahma, but the Brahmin-court and the Kalingas ...'



LONGINGS

The morning sun had hardly breathed in the morning-dew when the imperial procession led by Kullika approached Devi's palace. The Rani turned pale, and together with Mahindra and Sanghamitra walked silently up towards the beloved purohita.

'High Rani, you know what I have come for.' She nodded.

'It is the destiny of the oldest son, O, Rani.'

'And Siddharta, my Kullika?'

'In one *kalpa* only one Buddha, O, Rani.'

'Pataliputra!'

'The Maharajah performs a grand task. It is exalted to share in it.'

'Ashoka wished to do so. Mahindra is like his father, filled with compassion for all that lives, but his Father's strong vigour is lacking in him. He suits our happy Malwa better.'

'Happy since Ashoka became Viceroy here, High Rani.'

'You are right, Malwa was too small for his mind and I, too small for his great heart. Does he love Asandhimitra?'

'The Maharajah does not take important decisions until he has first discussed them with her. That we know, you and I too, High Rani, he needs

someone who says ‘yes’ to his own wide-ranging thoughts. Maybe, that way Mahindra ...’

Devi bowed her head in silence.

‘I want to go to Pataliputra, Mother. If father appoints me *Yuvaraja*¹, I have to be able to rule the country.’

‘And lead the army and have sacrificing ceremonies performed and offer wines and other strong drinks at feasts! Maybe, drink them?’

‘As if one cannot be the Maharajah without this!’

‘And the Tathagata, my son?’

‘Mother, imagine, a Maharajah who is a follower of the Buddha!’

‘Oh, that every human being has to fight anew the battle between the outside paths and the noble middle one! You, too, my child!’

‘The outside-paths are the easiest, dear mother, but to traverse the hard middle road! Again and again, one has to take responsibility for one’s actions. It is easier to wade through the banks of a river, for there one finds the support of the reed, of every branch, of every plant, of every embankment. But in the middle, where the waves surge with the current, there one needs strength, like Father has. Father wants to know whether I have enough strength. I think.’

‘I, too, would like to go to Pataliputra, Mother!’ Sanghamitra joined in. ‘I have not seen Father in six years. Sometimes, I have such a strong need for him that I ask every commander who comes from Pataliputra, or the sarthavahas of the great caravan, or envoys, how my father is. Vasudeva says, Father is wise as a god. And the sarthavahas say that the people of the great empire praise him for his righteous reign, his knowledge about all that is happening in the wide world, his vigour, his benevolence towards all who suffer. Two years ago, he supplied the whole of Haryana for six months with grains, medicines and physicians, thereby saving hundreds of thousands of people and animals in their need ... until the new harvest came, so the sarthavaha Lati from Mathura told me. Nearly the whole of the Deccan has chosen him as their Maharajah. His granaries are always full and his treasures grow because of the prosperity of the country. But he does not hoard them in the treasuries, like Dhana Nanda². Rather, he uses them for the support of the people who are ravaged by floods, or drought, or earthquakes, or illnesses. Lati travels on all the great trunk roads. It is Father, who orders the caretaking of the trade roads and the places of rest,

and he has wells dug for man and animal. In the cities of the west the people build Shiva-temples, because they believe that Father is the embodiment of Shiva. And we stay in Vidisha or Ujjain. Father hardly knows us anymore! I long for Father. Do you not, Mother?’

‘I! I have my concerns about my children. In Pataliputra, I cannot live. I have to live close by the stupa of Sanchi in Malwa. Our palace, his first happiness. You can go to Father, my child. I will stay here with my weak darling. It is your right to be at your Father’s. There will always be room for you here if you wish to return from the city of hell. I shall await that happy moment. And Kullika? He promised me that he would return soon!’

‘He who is spell-bound by the Maharajah, can follow only one path. And that is his, High Rani, because the success of his measures affects the welfare of so many.’

‘Ashoka ... sashoka.’

‘My work, a small part of the huge work he is undertaking, nears its end after which I shall return to Vidisha.’

When Ashoka received the message that his children had passed the last horse-post on the Ashoka Road he rode out to meet them with a procession of elephants, horses and chariots. He yearned to see them again. He met the party on the way to Bodh Gaya. The Maharajah was deeply touched to see his children again, fully grown, in youthful health and strength.

‘I had not expected my Sanghamitra ... because of Rani Devi.’

‘I was longing so much for you, my Father.’

‘Longing!’ The word coursed through his entire being. Ashoka looked at her. Devi, resilient, radiant, the way she stood timidly before him eighteen years ago in Subhadra’s palace with two peaches. Sanghamitra ... Longing for him! In the last six years he had not had much time to long for what he had left behind in Vidisha, as his endeavours had fully occupied his life in difficult times, when insecurity drove him in the night from one sleeping place to the other. But their longing for him he had not known all those years either. Was that why it touched him so deeply? Moved, he took the slender girl in his arms and lifted her up onto the elephant, seating her beside him.

The whole of Pataliputra had come out to welcome the Maharajah family with flowers poured out along the road. Cries, hailing the Maharajah, the Yuvaraja and the Princess, rang out along the Emperor’s

Road. The anthapura was excited. They feared the new inhabitants who would occupy an important place in the palace! Who was Mahindra? Was he a rough warrior from the interior of the country who had to be feared? And the Princess? Would she derive from her Father's might an influence that could be dangerous, or at least unpleasant, for the anthapura?

Mahindra turned out to be a slender, fine, fairytale Prince, who met his future home and its inmates with serious looks: he had nothing of the martial ways of his father. And Sanghamitra, with her shyness during the welcome in full honours in the capital, and at the overwhelming impression of the imperial palace and the richly dressed women and high officers ... she brought a smile to all faces, especially when she walked, somewhat hesitantly up to Subhadraangi.

'You are my grandmother? I am so happy!' And she knelt down and kissed Subhadraangi's gown. The old Rani lifted her up, took her in her arms and caressed her, charmed by her loveliness.

'So, Devi must have been when my son met her.'

She appraised Mahindra more coolly. Would he be a support or a rival for the Maharajah? Then she embraced him tenderly. Mahindra bowed deeply and she blessed him.

The following day Radhagupta took Mahindra on a visit to the soldiers' camps. In the art of warfare he was certainly lacking. Ashoka had come to the park to see whether he would be on time, was able to ride a horse, whether he had any close liking for his future work. Mahindra soon appeared, young and buoyant.

'Does my son ride a horse or does he prefer an elephant?'

'A horse, my Father.' Ashoka noticed with joy how well the young man sat on the horse and controlled the animal. Just as they were about to ride off, Sanghamitra came out. She watched her brother ride off and approached her father, taking his arm.

'People are awake early in Vidisha, I see.'

'Yes, my Father. This is how I remember you, when you rode off in Ujjain. It hurt me, because often you stayed away for days. Mahindra will never be a good horseman.'

'He is on horseback like the best of my warriors.'

'But when he has been riding two yojanas and the horse gets too warm and sweats, he pities the poor animal, jumps off, and is not to be urged

again to mount before the animal has had a rest. That is what Mother found so endearing in him.'

'Horses have to work hard, just like men.'

'Mahindra used to say that tired people can complain; whereas animals, we have to care for.'

'Did the journey not fatigue my daughter too much? And what is she looking for so early?'

'For you, my Father. For six years I knew nothing about you, apart from what I came to know through strangers. Now I myself wish to see what you are doing. Is it difficult to rule such a great empire, my Father?'

'No, everything proceeds by itself as long as one does not stay in bed when Ushas opens the gates for the new day.'

'Am I allowed to see and hear what you are doing daily? Up to now you have been to me an unfamiliar Maharajah. Later on, when I have to return to Vidisha, I want to know what you are doing when I think of you. You are not a stranger to me, Father, are you?'

'Certainly not, my child. I could not even think that you kept your thoughts so busy with me. Stay close to me today. Come.'

The Maharajah, touched by her affection, put his arm around her shoulders and together they went to the hall, where the guards were posted.

'See here, Satyavat, my daughter; she is curious and so needs your protection in our beautiful city.'

'I did not know that your gracious Majesty possessed such riches in Vidisha.'

Ashoka laughed, and made his way to the great hall, where the priests of the Brahmin-court waited for him with their morning-blessing. After the ceremony, Ashoka introduced his daughter. The Brahmins made a light genuflection; a few spoke a friendly word of welcome. One of the young Brahmins had hardly moved: With admiring eyes he looked at the slender figure, who, on the arm of her father, was striding along the rows, looking around with curiosity. She started, when she saw, how the young priest followed her with glittering eyes. At the end of the rows she once more turned back timidly. His eyes pierced hers. She looked ahead bashfully, clung to her father's arm, who felt it immediately, and, looking back, understood the cause of her shyness. He greeted and proceeded with Sanghamitra to his working quarters.

‘Who is that young priest, my Father? I have seen him before.’

‘He struck me, too. You will soon meet him. His name is Rauma.’

The Maharajah first received the treasurers, then the lipikaras from the different departments; then, in the great auditorium, the subjects from all parts of his empire, who wished to present their pleas before the Maharajah. Lipikaras wrote down the decisions of the Maharajah. Sanghamitra did not understand much of all the matters that had to be dealt with but she looked in admiration at her father, who seemed to know of every case, for which the people came from far and near. He probed into it and after the interrogation, immediately passed on a decree.

‘How do you know all that, my Father?’

‘For that I have my officers and spies, and departments, where all of the reports are any moment available to me. What value would my judgement have for a man of Ujjain or Taxila, if I did not keep myself informed of his petition? Before anyone comes with his complaints or requests, my employees give me the information from their department.’

‘How many informants must you have then?’ Ashoka smiled at her.

‘Thousands. They cross the country as students, penitents, ascetics, physicians, beggars, merchants, magicians, fortune-tellers; I can use even impoverished Brahmins or their widows, when they want to serve me loyally. Every town has its information-post. Deceit, oppression, wrong implementation of laws, crimes and worse in my great empire, would not be punished or prevented, if I did not have a staff of intelligent, honest, truthful spies at my service. I want to know what happens in the country. My people have to believe that the Maharajah is informed about everything, and that he judges expertly. That is needed, as long as people’s own will is not strong enough, to forsake the evil, do what is good and control the mind.’

‘Are you a Buddhist, father?’

‘No. We have to proceed now as people are waiting.’

‘I am Sudgata, O, Maharajah, a Vaishya from the land of Kosali, not far from Sravasti. I have killed the Purusha of the holy Maharajah.’

‘I know. I was informed that you had been seeking your death in the Terai, Sudgata. Would not that have been better? You still dare to appear before me?’

‘I know that in Sravasti they would have sentenced me to death because the judges and officers sided with the Purusha, Bali. I do not feel guilty,

though. If you, holy Maharajah, will sentence me thus then I will patiently accept the penalty of death because I know that you are righteous.'

'Get up, Sudgata, and tell me what happened in Sravasti.'

'I had a happy family, noble Maharajah. We were blessed with a son and two daughters. The son would succeed me later, if the Purusha of the Maharajah agreed; both the girls were widely known because of their beauty and good care of their duties at home. We wished for two sturdy Vaishyas who would desire them as their wives. One day, however, a messenger from the Purusha, Bali, came to ask Uttara, the elder one, to become his wife. I knew that the girls from the higher varnas did not want the purusha as husband because he was suffering from a secret sickness, leprosy or worse, and also that Uttara would be doomed to become ill through him. So, I refused. The Purusha was incensed with me. My land-fees were increased, the permitted amount of water from the irrigation canal decreased. A few days later his Purohita came to induce me, to give Uttara as yet to the Purusha. If I agreed, my land taxes would be lowered again, and the water supply restored. I explained to the priest why I had refused. He jeered at me and said that Bali was as healthy as I was and that I was listening to gossip; I should not thwart the happiness of my child. Yet, I refused again out of fear for my Uttara. Two days later, when she was milking the cows on the land, servants of the purusha assaulted her, brought her to his large house, where a priest immediately married them. When I heard about it, it was too late. Moreover, I could not do anything against the employees. A year later, Uttara died. Some time later, the Purusha asked for my second daughter to become his wife. I refused firmly. In every possible way, they tried to force me again. The priest came to see me again. I warned him not to let Kesina be taken away by servants for then I would kill them. I reproached him for deceiving me, but this time I would not let the same thing happen. In his anger he threatened to curse me. I replied that I would then become a Buddhist. Once more Bali sent three servants to take Kesina. In the jungle of the Terai I have often fought lions and wild elephants, which were trying to harm my cattle and fields, O, Maharajah. I never left Kesina on her own and chased away the three men with my club. Bali himself appeared the next morning. He promised me riches, more land, water, as much as I wanted, a new farmstead, slaves to work on the land, if I would give him Kesina. I said that Kesina, for sake of her health, was not for sale. Infuriated, he left and the next day sent ten servants. After I had

killed two of them, I was overpowered by the remaining eight. Then they abducted Kesina. I sent a servant to the purusha, to say that I would agree, on the condition that he would give me proof of the promised favours and that I be allowed to witness the ceremony. I was summoned to come to the government house. The purohita received me politely in the presence of the most important employees and praised me for becoming wise. I requested him to inform the purusha that I wished a sealed proof of my rights and so I asked to see him. Bali was very friendly. I showed my regret that I had been so obstinate. He said many friendly things to me, thanked me for my agreement and wished to keep all his promises. Then he took me to his work-room. There I, with my reaping hoe... brought to an end his sins, shut the room, and fled. My horse was waiting for me, and I galloped off to the Terai ... I know the elephant paths in the jungle well, Sire. When I reached the forest-swamps, I chased the horse back. I could not take it with me. On my own, I continued along the path through the dangerous forest with its snakes, lions, wild elephants and crocodiles. It was a continuous struggle for my life. But I had only one goal: to reach the Holy Maharajah and to hear from him my sentence. I arrived from Nepal alive, and then, crossing Kusinagara and Vaishali, came here. I do not know what has happened to my poor daughter, my wife and my son. But they are not guilty in any way, noble Maharajah.'

Sudgata fell to his knees, exhausted and overcome, and bowed his head to the floor. Sanghamitra stood up, sobbing, walked towards him and put her hand on his shoulder. 'Get up, Sudgata.'

Sudgata raised himself up and looked up at her, upset. Then his questing eyes wandered over to the Maharajah.

'That is the sentence of my daughter for the father of Kesina, my Sudgata. Get up. We will investigate your case. Lipikara, order immediately for a hundred riders to Sravasti. Have them bring here as soon as possible, Sudgata's family, the purohita of Bali, the employees who were present during the arrival of Sudgata in the government house and the eight servants of Bali. Sudgata will be our guest for the time being.'

'Gracious Maharajah, let me join them to Sravasti.'

'No.'



THE GAME OF THE RANI-CHOICE

Next it was the turn of the inhabitants of Pataliputra. One of the last ones was Rauma.

‘Rauma, you are the son of a rich Vaishya, a tradesman of Kashi.’ Rauma turned pale and lowered his proud head.

‘Yes, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Why did you go to Taxila?’

‘Sire, I loathed the trade. I was Brahmacharin with a very learned Brahmin who finally initiated me into the secret doctrine. When I left I asked him, after my father had gifted him a large endowment for my pupilage, whether a Vaishya could ever become a Brahmin, like Nachiketas¹, the son of Vagasravasa. He answered: ‘Go to Taxila, my son, and there learn to delve deep into the Vedas. It depends on your knowledge whether for you the boundaries of the varna give way.’ Father permitted me, so I studied diligently in the far west, and with success.’

‘Why you did become the friend of Prince Kala and Vimalamitra?’ Again, Rauma was astonished.

‘Because I despised Raja Sumana, and especially his mindless council.’

‘Because of that you forfeited your varna and fled to Ujjain.’

‘Yes, revered Maharajah, the council wanted to have me imprisoned. That would have meant my death. Gopa, Raumi and Tungi, at whose house I met Prince Kala often, requested Nila, the sarthavaha, to help me escape to Ujjain. Disguised as a camel-servant, I reached Ujjain together with him, where Vasudeva, on the recommendation of Prince Kala, appointed me as a Purusha for road-inspection in Malwa. In that way I came to know the west, from Bharuchkacha to Vidisha and even the pilgrim routes along the Narmada.’

‘And the stupa of Sanchi.’

‘Yes, revered Maharajah. Sire, an irresistible feeling impelled me to go to Pataliputra. In Vidisha and in Sanchi, I saw the Maharani Devi, and ...’

‘Yes, yes, I know. Why did not you ask Vasudeva for a recommendation for me?’

‘Sire, I would have had to tell him then the reason why I went, for I did not want to deceive him.’

‘But you deceived the head of the Brahmin-court. You are a Vaishya.’

‘I knew of your struggle with the sacrificial priests. Revata misled them. Why should I not mislead them for my purpose? It opened the door to the palace for me, and maybe ...’

‘Yes, yes, I know. What is it, Rauma, that you want to achieve?’

‘Maybe, that one day I can enter into your service. Therefore, I have asked to see you today, O, Maharajah. I know that you once had taken on a Shudra as highest Purusha of Bharuchkacha, that you have had a Shudra as your most important informant, a Vaishya as your chief palace-guard, a Kshatriya as the Viceroy of Taxila. Why could I not be of service to you?’

‘As what?’

‘Whatever you wish, O, Maharajah. In the Brahmin-court, with its concern for petty ceremonies, and even more concern for their own trifling bodily welfare, I get choked, revered Maharajah. It is an unworthy life, for which thousands of men waste their vigour.’

‘Waste, you say, Rauma?’

‘Whoever has been looking around in your great empire, knows that even without ceremonies or sacrifices, everything happens just as well. No drought, no heat, no hail, no flood, no earthquake, stops at the word of a priest, and no rain or fertility comes because of his offering ceremony. It stops or it comes, in spite of him. For the person who offers as much as for

the one who does not offer. Do I then still wish to be a sacrificial priest and be only concerned about my clothes, food, shelter and fees? Then I would rather lie down on a couch in my father's home and languish on his riches!'

‘What do you want, my Rauma?’

‘Sire, I saw in the past few years the work in your empire progressing everywhere. Roads, irrigation works, herbal gardens, the administration of the different provinces, intelligence-posts, courier-services. They need people who, inspired by your energy, will work for the realisation of what every right-thinking human being considers as a lofty vision. The wooden palaces and buildings in the capital fall under the sledgehammer of your time. Stonecutters, tile-makers, work for the reconstruction of luxurious, elegant buildings ... Will there not be a place for a Vaishya who wishes to participate in your great plan?’

Ashoka looked directly into the young priest's eyes, which could not hide the restlessness of his soul.

‘And your fee?’

‘You determine that, O, Maharajah.’

‘My fee will never be of human beings, whose own will would oppose it.’

Rauma's eyes caught Sanghamitra who, with growing amazement and admiration, had been listening to the young priest. His glance made her feel shy. She cast down her eyes. Ashoka summoned Agnibrahma to come.

Buoyantly, the young Prince entered, thinking he would only find his uncle.

‘Agnibrahma, meet your cousin-sister, my daughter Sanghamitra.’

For one moment Agnibrahma stood perplexed. At the palace offices the two newcomers to the court had been actively discussed, the daughter of Shiva certainly would not have taken along beauty on her earthly journey. But this Princess seemed to possess the legendary beauty of the Rani of Vidisha! Slim and graceful, she rose from her seat, her fine glossy hair adorned with some soft whitish pearls in a silvery setting, contrasting even more its darkness around her regular, oval-shaped face, now blushing with a glow. And the clear intelligent eyes ... all of it left Agnibrahma in confusion. He knelt down, kissed the hem of her robe. She reached her hand out to him, as though to lift him up. While exchanging looks with each

other, a happy glance of joyous youth shone. Ashoka, to whom nothing escaped, went on:

‘And this is Rauma, the sacrificial priest, who wishes to make himself useful to the empire. For the time being I will place him under your guidance.’

The two men appraised each other with cold glances and bowed.

And while Ashoka, together with Sanghamitra, left for the army-camps on the elephant, Agnibrahma and Rauma started their work. The Prince was amazed at the thorough knowledge of the priest. He knew in detail the most important sects in Ashoka’s great empire, and was miraculously well informed about the situation, especially in the Punjab, the West and the South.

‘How do you know all these things that I could only find out with considerable effort, by serious study, and reports coming in slowly?’

‘Well, I have lived over there, travelled much and heard much, because everything interested me. My gurus were the most erudite, so that I came to know Brahmanism thoroughly and, slowly on, all the sects for which it is the foundation.’

‘And the rapidly expanding Shaivism in the western part of the country?’

‘Well, that certainly is not an offshoot of Brahmanism. I only know of one explanation: the great worship of the Maharajah, who, in those areas where he ruled as a Prince, was taken to be the embodiment of Shiva, the Mahadeva. An Aryan can revere a human being, but he can only worship the divine, the unfolding Atman, or that incarnation of which the great man is born. And so, in the west, one transfers the worshipping of Ashoka to Shiva, of whom they believe he is the embodiment. Ashoka will die, but Shiva remains alive and, unfortunately, it will depend not on him but on the priests how generations to come will perceive and serve him.’

The close cooperation between the young men led to mutual appreciation and soon to deep friendship. In the early hours of dawn they often went horse-riding into the surrounding countryside and at night they strolled, mostly together, in the spacious parks of the palace.

Once they met Sanghamitra there.

‘Have both the scholars found each other?’

The friends looked at each other and laughed.

‘We have as yet not been thinking of that, high Princess, but our common labour proceeds smoothly,’ Rauma said.

‘We have only been waiting for each other, beautiful cousin-sister. What is the shade of a park without the cool water of the lotus-pond, against the fierce rays of Surya.’

‘So, not the lame and the blind!’ she said laughingly. ‘No, your imagery of shade and pond is more beautiful for two such vigorous men.’

‘I knew my work in theory, Rauma in practice.’

‘So, Father had a happy hand.’

‘His third eye gleams through everything, high Princess.’

‘I will not disturb you any longer. They are waiting for me in the anthapura.’

‘What a pity!’ they called out at the same time.

‘So, even here you are united,’ she laughed.

Both of them watched her admiringly and then silently went on their way.

‘Kama has shot an arrow into your heart, my Prince.’

‘And he directed the same one in yours.’

‘I saw her first in Sanchi, with her mother. Her image pursued me for weeks. Then I travelled to Pataliputra, to reach for the highest ... mahamatra for the Maharajah ... What does it matter?’

‘Did you wish for the highest, to attain her or to forget her, my friend?’

‘To forget.’

‘The choice is hers. One of us.’

A few days later Sanghamitra met Rauma, who was on his own in the park.

‘I see the cool water of the pond but where is the shadow?’

Rauma flushed. ‘Does the high Princess long so much for the shelter of the shade-giving foliage?’

‘How seriously you take me, my Rauma!’

‘Your preference strikes me more than you may think.’

‘My preference should leave you cold. We hardly know each other yet.’

‘I often saw you in Vidisha and in Ujjain. Whoever sees you will not be able to forget you so easily.’

‘No?’ she asked shyly. ‘Why did you not come to the palace then?’

‘I was only a lesser purusha.’

‘Father says that you are very learned, could even become a mahamatra.’

Rauma bowed deeply. ‘That is joyful to hear, but only because it is said by you, high Princess Sanghi. Joy is always connected to persons.’

‘But for a scholar surely not to a young, inexperienced Princess.’

‘Not what is learned, but what the Atman unfolds in us, is what counts.’

‘That is exactly what Agnibrahma said yesterday at the full-moon festival. I do not understand all that learning though.’

‘You love Agnibrahma!’

‘Yes. Like shade in the hot sunshine ... and the pond.’

‘And what has your preference?’

‘None,’ she laughed.

‘Who looks for the coolness of the shade against the burning rays of the sun, does not look for it in the pond.’

‘The choice is too difficult for me, Rauma!’ And laughingly, she walked away towards the palace.

One evening, after a hot day, she was walking in the park with Agnibrahma.

‘Tired from your work, Agnibrahma?’

‘More pleased with this beautiful evening. Even if I were to be tired, the Maharajah does not give us time to give in to it. His interest whips us on.’

‘Yes, yes, we know his maxim: Example is always better than precept. I have participated one day in the work of the Maharajah! At last, in the ministers-council, I fell asleep from fatigue. He then accompanied me to the anthapura.’

They neared the pond. On the high bench at the rear of the boat, Ashoka and Asandhimitra were seated, allowing themselves to be rowed, gliding gently along, by the oarsmen. Rauma, who approached from the Brahmin-court, joined Agnibrahma and Sanghi.

‘Do you know that the Maharajah once experienced a great disappointment on this boat because of the beautiful Aradi, later Sumana’s wife?’ And Agnibrahma related what a commotion the ‘Wild Prince’ once provoked in his youth, amongst the distinguished daughters of Pataliputra, at the game of the Rani-choice.

‘Maybe, Aradi regrets her stand now! But it was just play.’

‘Well, beautiful cousin-sister, every woman that fortune allows to choose for herself, regrets her choice later on. And in every game, well played, lies the deep foundation of reality. Who loves the luxuriant style of a Sumana, does not appreciate the zealousness for work of an Ashoka.’

‘You men have an easy way of talking. After a wrong choice, you choose again.’

‘If one has a choice at all!’

‘Not so gloomy, Rauma; it is not a virtue to endure life when it fulfils all our wishes but when it turns against us.’

The boat approached the bank.

‘Do you want to sail along?’

‘And play the game of the Rani-choice, my Father? If only no wild Prince shows up!’ Ashoka looked at Sanghi and smiled. Two young men and his daughter. Who?

‘Do you know the story of my shame?’

‘The Rani-choice is no shame for the loser.’

‘The Rani-choice was not for everyone pleasant, my child.’

‘Setbacks strengthen the human being, says the holy Kullika.’

‘The good human being! So, for the pleasure of my beloved daughter, we will play our game. Rauma will seat himself on the high bench at the back, Agnibrahma on the forward deck, we in the middle. Sanghi, you are the only bride. Or, shall we have more girls come?’

‘No, no! The others know the game! They would laugh at my stupidity.’

‘You start.’ Ashoka explained what she had to do.

Sanghi went, diffidently, to Rauma. ‘What have you to offer me, Rauma?’

‘If the Maharajah wishes so and he believes in me, I will be mahamatra and you will live with me in a beautiful palace with towers and gold-embellished columns. The most beautiful halls will be for my Rani. With countless servants I will make life a dream for you.’

‘You promise too little, Rauma.’ She went to her cousin-brother.

‘And you, Agnibrahma? What do you have to offer, should I become your Rani?’

‘If the Maharajah wishes so and believes in me, I will be viceroy in Taxila. You will live in a cool palace, built of stone, reaching the sky; it will

be so beautiful that the gods will envy you. You will have a hundred rooms and thousand servants to fulfil your every wish.'

'You promise too much, Agnibrahma.'

'Which choice would you advise me to make, highly revered Maharajah.'

'I love my daughter so much, that she may make her own choice.'

'And you, high Agramahisi?'

'What they promise you is maya. With that you cannot be contented, Princess Sanghi.'

'Rauma, your position, your palace, your halls, your servants are transitory, hence maya. Offer me something higher.'

'Divine Princess, my love will uphold you and make your house a heavenly abode. Any wish of my Rani will be more to me than the wishes of the gods, your will more powerful than theirs. Only when I can conjure a smile of happiness on your face, will I be contented.'

'You promise too much, Rauma.'

'And you, Agnibrahma, if the Maharajah is not willing and does not believe in you? Your offer was not dependent on you. What more do you offer?'

'My love will give you everything: rich clothing made from Kashi-muslin with gold-embroidered flowers and precious stones, and jewellery that will delight even a Rani, so that you will be the most beautiful of the women of the empire.'

'You determine the choice, revered Maharajah.'

'The choice is so difficult, the happiness offered to you so precious, yet different, that I, out of concern for my daughter, dare not risk making the wrong choice.'

'And you, beautiful Agramahisi?'

'You are not able to make your choice yet, dear Sanghi, because they measure their love with earthly measures.'

'So, your love is an earthly love, Rauma?'

'High Princess, my love for you inspires me to strive for the highest, to do all that is good, a wish to work for the happiness that the Maharajah wishes to give to all his people. That is why it is of much more value than earthly maya.'

Again, Sanghi went to her cousin-brother.

‘You wish to flatter my vanity, Agnibrahma. Is your love merely earthly?’

‘We human beings think in earthly values, beautiful Sanghi. And with you, one thinks only of the most precious of what the earth offers us. But my love is the highest that human feelings can reach: the pursuit of the most sublime, but the greatest sacrifice, too: myself. Together with you: the divine perfection of the human being, unity of endeavour of both ... Without you ... Yama.’

‘Whose Rani will I be, revered Maharajah?’

‘The choice lies clear before you, beloved Princess. I am not the one to choose. Decide that by yourself.’

‘And you, high Agramahisi?’

‘What is valuable to me, need not be so for you, dear Princess. Do you feel that you have to support your husband in his highest endeavour or do you want to be one with him in divine perfection? That is your choice.’

Sanghi seemed to waver for some time. Then, hesitantly, she walked up towards Rauma.

‘Rauma, you thought: I inspired you in your endeavours for work. But that endeavouring you are yourself. Without me too, you will be a great man in your work for the Maharajah and the people. I am only an unconscious goddess to you. I cannot be that, however much you revere me.’

Rauma shrank. ‘For me, love is the secret power that directs and pushes the human being forward to what he reveres the most ... the spirit of the All-spirit ... the will of the All-will. Love, for the sake of love, would be death to me, high Princess. That would be for me like power for the sake of power, mind for the sake of mind and will for the sake of will. Love has to be a driving force for all that is great and good, while, by itself it lies beyond love.’

Sanghi did not understand why the Agramahisi blessed Rauma. Ashoka maintained an impassive face. Pondering, she went to Agnibrahma.

‘Agnibrahma, I want to be your Rani. Together with you, I will strive for unity. With you, the divine perfection of the human being, without you ... death.’

‘I thank you, beautiful Princess: Beyond my love, nothing exists in the universe.’

‘This was a meaningful play of thoughts, children, and Sanghi has borne it with skill. Take a seat next to Agnibrahma.’

Rauma neared the Maharajah, pale in pallor. Ashoka saw how great an impact Sanghi’s choice had made upon him.

‘It was a game, my Rauma. But remember: in a well-played game lies the base of reality. That we need, you and I.’

‘I thank you, high Majesty. I have a request to make to you. The work in Agnibrahma’s office is beautiful, but does not satisfy entirely my restless nature. I would prefer to do something that is more challenging. With the anta-mahamatras in the far-away places of your vast empire. I believe I have, in Malwa, shown to have the capability for it.’

‘I want to give you proof of my trust in you, Rauma. I need a mahamatra in Sodra, which borders the north of Kalinga. It is an arduous as well as an independent assignment, because my highest purusha will have to take immediate action on unlawful acts of a troublesome border-people. You can test your mettle on this labour. You have seen many countries and peoples. I hope that you love them, that you are touched by their distress and want to work for their happiness, like me.’

‘If you place your trust in me, I will be pleased to take the charge of ruling over there. I thank the gracious Maharajah.’

‘Report tomorrow to minister Radhagupta.’

Sanghi felt disappointed and hardly realised that Rauma’s departure was connected to the play ...

‘You played your game too seriously, Princess Sanghi.’

‘Do you not regret, that your friend is leaving, Agnibrahma?’

‘No. I played seriously, too.’

‘Do you hope to become a viceroy?’ Agnibrahma nodded.

‘And ...’

‘And Sanghi as Rani! Would you like that?’

‘If Father wishes it to be so and believes in me,’ she confessed, blushing.

‘We will ask him.’



THE LITTLE ARHAT

Early one morning, Aradi sat in the western verandah of her house that was built on an elevated place in the Khemavana. On her left, in the hazy distance, she could look at the green pastures of the banks of the Ganga, on her right at the park, where the austere huts of the monks were scattered about in enchanting disorder around the Vihara and the assembly-hall, in between the *nyagrodha*¹ trees and the mango-groves. Fan-palms spread their protective shade over the thatched roofs of the dwellings, or stood in rows around the clear ponds, where the white, red, pink and purple lotus flowers dreamt between their lush green leaves. When, on the night of the battle in front of the gates of Pataliputra, the disaster-struck widow of the fallen Raja asked for shelter for the night here, the venerable Sagata immediately gave her his secluded hut, but a day later, they started to collect timber for a building. The most able craftsmen amongst the monks and *upasakas*², living in the surroundings, began to construct the house, the one where she now was living. And although it was not in accordance with the rules of the congregation of monks, in her house a certain luxury was allowed. The feeling of compassion— Buddha's loftiest precept—was the deciding element. The house was quietly situated and now, with the

monsoon coming to an end, nature showed off its richly ornamented blossoms.

‘No, Sagata, I have no wishes. For more than seven years you have been taking care of my house, my son and me. In the past I lived in a world where everyone was deceiving the other, for gold, or an official post, where everyone was ranging around with the ugliest of secrets and intentions and wanted to misuse the other, even to kill. Mistrust ruled them, Sagata, one could rely on no one. Not on Sumana, the council nor the priests, the Princes leading the army, not even on the warriors, nor the supporters in the capital, nor the gods! It was the simmering insecurity of hell, the murky bloodlust of the demons. And there my darling would have been born, pious Sagata! Then I came here, to the park that Rani Khema had gifted to the followers of the Buddha. Here is the quiet goodness, the truth, the natural truth! At first, I, who came here from that world of deceit, could not understand it, Sagata. It felt as if I had escaped from hell and had arrived with my son in the lovely *Tushita*³-haven, where the Buddha stayed before he was born out of Rani Maya. Here Nigrodha is safe, I feel safe and fine; that is my happiness! The priest Shakuni wanted to take my little Prince to the Kalingas. Later on he would be able to lay claim to the ivory throne of Pataliputra. He might have to fight for that throne of riches! Become a demon himself, like the Raja of the hell! No, Sagata, it is my deepest wish that he will remain the friend of all these sincere, truthful men of the Khemavana, and they, his friends. That is how it should be, Sagata, that is how I wish it. If I could only be allowed to live here, a woman at a monastery of the Buddha. How do you dare to let me, a woman, live for seven years in the Khemavana, my Sagata!’

‘The loftiest precept of the Tathagata is compassion and mercy for our near ones, high Rani.’

‘Who are your near ones?’

‘All creatures that live.’

‘How will you be able to help all living creatures that suffer, the way you helped me?’

‘The Buddha wants us to comfort those in need of solace. The way of the Buddha that leads to salvation, meanders through a beauteous landscape of goodness and wisdom. He who cannot see the loveliness of that landscape, nor takes it into his soul, and is not sated with its absolute joy,

fails to even see the path, will not walk that path to the most supreme bliss, Nirvana. Fortunate are you, Rani Aradi, and fortunate is Nigrodha, that the Khemavana fills you with joy. We are beggars, who cause well-being to them who may give us alms. Your happiness is the most precious alms for the monks of the Khemavana, O, Rani.'

'Will he – you know who, Abbot Sagata – not be a danger for my boy. Please tell me.'

'The Maharajah never displayed any interest in the Khemavana and its inhabitants. Many sramanas visited the capital. Do you want to know what they heard?'

'Yes, please. You know how I, in those earlier years, could not find rest, for I was in fear he would be near. He hates me and Nigrodha, and fears him as Sumana's son and heir.'

'I will send Assaji to you. He is very learned, has visited many countries, knows the Maharajah well and knows what people think about him.'

'The monk who always lowers his eyes when he goes past my house?'

'Any monk is expected to cast down his eyes before a woman. So, the Tathagata wants it.'

'Nigrodha loves him and looks out for him.'

'Assaji teaches with patience, wisdom and with charming narratives, the greatness of the Buddha to the 'little *arhat*'⁴. And no pupil is more interested in Buddha's life, the beautiful *jatakas*⁵, even in the simple form of the teachings, than the 'little arhat'.'

Assaji came forward and, with his eyes lowered, narrated to the Rani much about the Maharajah; about his tireless labours, his righteousness, the growing prosperity in the empire, and the trust and adoration of his subjects.

'It is, high Rani, as if Piyadasi looks over the whole world; as if he knows the proper way of recourse from all calamities. The Maharajah is fortune itself for India!'

'You know Ashoka well, Assaji. Did you know Raja Sumana as well?'

'Certainly, High Rani.'

'What do you know about him?'

'The setting of Chandra closes the beautiful night-lotus, high Rani. Do you want me to open out the closed flower, like Surya does with Ushas'

morning-haze? It is a law of nature that she remains closed in the fierce sunlight. Pankaja, the day-lotus, has now unfolded her petals.'

'Sumana was beautiful, Assaji.'

'Do you see at a distance the holy Ganga, the rich paddy-fields and sugar cane fields, O, Rani? Their beauty lies in their actively bestowing food to all that lives. Do you want to compare them to the splendour of the regal-flowers of vines, adorning the jungle like brilliant garlands, but forgotten in its deepest darkness?'

'I only can hate Ashoka!'

'Hate, you say, Rani. Hate for the one who is praised by the whole of India. Ashoka, the Righteous, the father of his people! Hatred is the enemy of the supreme. Nirvana is the ending of desire, the ending of the futility of all earthly life, the ending of delusion, the ending of hatred. Why then do you still hate, high Rani!'

'He, who cannot wait till Yama leads a man to hell, but creates a hell himself! Who killed my husband and put him in a grave of shame ...'

'Did the Maharajah wish to do so, O, Rani? Did he, the mighty one ...'

'Stolen might!'

'No!'

'Sumana was the Crown-Prince!'

'No!'

'Sumana wanted beauty, grandeur, splendour!'

'No.'

'Magadha, Videhi, the whole of Madhyadesa wanted Sumana!'

'No, the sacrificial priests wanted Sumana. The beauty, glitter and splendour of the Maharajah is like the golden, emerald or diamond, the silvery ringing jewellery, which waits to adorn the leper as though to resplendent majesty. Righteousness and kindness is like the beauty of jasmine that garlands the healthy man as adoration. The Maharajah works hard and only for the welfare of his people.

'Do you know the Agramahisi?'

'The first Rani, Asandhimitra, is beautiful as dawn, serious as Khallataka, wise as Sayana, full of love, like Sita.'

'How is it possible that such a goddess can be Ashoka's Agramahisi? Does she not hate that king of the hell!'

'She knows the Maharajah.'

‘He was a danger for Bindusara, for Sumana. He will be so for my son!’

‘For none of the three! But he knew that Raja Sumana and his council had trained twenty-four murderers to be set loose on him. That demanded caution and severity, because he was Maharajah.’

Aradi got up, shaken.

‘You know that, Assaji? Then you know too that my son has all the more reason to fear him!’

‘I know that he has nothing to fear from him. If the Maharajah knew how sweet and serious the little arhat is, then he would wish to do so much for him. Bring him to the Maharajah and you will know it, too.’

‘He will bring my child, Sumana’s son, to his hell!’ Aradi cried out, upset.

‘Bring Nigrodha to the Maharajah and your mother-heart will be at repose at last.’

‘Why are you here? And are you not serving your Maharajah whom you praise highly?’

‘A follower of the Buddha cannot be a warrior in the army. No one wants to serve him more than I do.’

‘And the Buddha?’

‘One does not serve the Buddha; one worships him and follows him. I was in Pataliputra when Prince Ashoka was young, followed him to Taxila when he became the army commander, and later on to Ujjain, when he became the Raja. Nobody knows him better than I, or it should be the holy Kullika. Send Nigrodha to the Maharajah, for his and for your happiness.’

‘Why does such a holy man, who hates Brahmins, not become a Buddhist?’

‘He reveres great Buddhists like Kullika, and great Brahmins like Sayana and Khallataka. But he is the highest judge, the Lord of life and death, the highest of the army. Maybe, Shiva. How can he be a follower of the Buddha? Send Nigrodha to the Maharajah, O, Rani, for your peace of mind.’

‘His hell!’

‘Do you think the Maharajah is ignorant about your stay here, and that it would be difficult for him to take away Nigrodha from you, if he so wished? Would you not like to see that your son becomes the Raja, of Ujjain, for instance?’

‘No! Not even Maharajah! Might and wealth do not lead to happiness but limit our thinking. Every possession, taken from others, is a barrier on the way to Nirvana. And it is to that path that Abbot Sagata and the other pious monks should lead him. That is how I desire it. I have escaped that world of lies, threats and killing. Would I desire that my darling should go back there again?’

‘Then let him get to know the Maharajah, who prizes truth as the loftiest of virtues, who allows everyone freedom to discover his own right path. Trust your son to my care! I will take him safely to the capital and bring him back to you, O, Rani.’

‘I shudder to trust others with the most precious that I have. Why is unrest driving you to the Khemavana so often?’

‘Compassion is the greatest virtue for the Buddha and his followers. When the monk has in solitude found complete peace and freedom of passion, he has to seek out the ones lost in ignorance and desires, to show them the way to salvation. I want to save you from your irrational fear.’

Aradi considered this at length.

‘Satyavat, a small guest for you, a compatriot in faith. Take care of him and walk with him through the park in the direction of the palace so that the Maharajah will see him. I guaranteed his safety, son of Prince Sumana!’ he added, whispering. Then Girika warned the purohita Kullika, who hastened to Satyavat’s house.

‘Well, Girika?’ asked Ashoka.

‘Sire, the feelings and attitude of Rani Aradi have not changed. She hates you; she thinks she does. She wishes to know nothing about an official palace task for her son. The little fellow, brought up by Sagata and the monks of the Khemavana is, what is more, so softhearted that there will never grow in him a warrior, seeking power or possession. The Rani rejects any teaching that proceeds in that direction. She loathes the air of deceit and killing in which she had lived earlier, and wants for Nigrodha the peaceful goodness and silent bliss of a Buddhist monastery.’

‘And Shakuni?’

‘In Kalinga the people do not give thought anymore to Nigrodha. They want a Maharajah of iron. Sire, I brought along the boy. You can see for yourself.’

‘Who? Nigrodha?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Aradi allowed that?’

‘Hardly. I was able to persuade her at last, that it was for the attainment of her peace of mind and of his good fortune, O, Maharajah.’

‘And where is he?’

‘I brought him to the chief of the palace guards, Satyavat.’

‘Come along, I would like to see him.’

They saw Kullika busily talking with Nigrodha, followed by Satyavat, in the park. Ashoka was struck by the quiet, serious air of the ‘little arhat’ to whom it appeared, the surroundings impressed but little. When he approached, and Kullika and Satyavat greeted him respectfully, the boy looked at him, inquisitively.

‘Are you the Maharajah?’

‘That is what they call me.’

‘Do you have a hell?’

‘People say so.’

‘Do you not know that yourself?’

‘I have never been there.’

‘Because you are good or because you are afraid? Assaji says, the Maharajah is good and righteous.’

‘Perhaps, you would like to see the hell or are you afraid of it?’

‘No, father Sagata says there is no hell, only the path to Nirvana, on which you can go or not go. A hell one makes oneself.’

‘That is very wisely thought by father Sagata. Would you not like to play in the park, to sail in a beautiful boat on the big pond with the other children?’

‘No, the ponds of the Khemavana are much nicer! But Father Sagata said that everyone has to be serious about his life. He who is indifferent to the teachings of the Buddha walks along the path of mortality; that is of fleetingness, and then he will be born again and has to begin all over with his life. But he who is serious goes the way to immortality, to Nirvana and does not need to take birth anymore.’

‘Are there no other children in the Khemavana?’

‘No, only my deer, Sika.’

‘How do you like the park of the Maharajah?’

‘Nice, but not as nice as the Khemavana!’

‘Not as nice?’

‘No, in the Khemavana are mother and Father Sagata and the monks, Assaji and Sika, my deer. It is a small one, Pura found it in the jungle, crying. Pura thinks that hunters or birds of prey had killed Sika’s mother.’

‘If the Khemavana is so beautiful, I’d better show you the palace.’

‘Assaji, Assaji!’ Nigrodha ran towards Girika, who had been watching at a distance. ‘Come, we will go to the palace!’

As soon as he saw the palace, Nigrodha observed: ‘This hall is even bigger than the Vihara.’

‘Sit down, Nigrodha.’ Ashoka entered the hall, alone with the boy. The little boy walked up to the ivory throne and climbed on to it, looked around in amazement, looked up at the tall slender pillars, embellished with gold leaves and silver birds, at the niches and the walls, shining with gold and sparkling with precious stones.

‘Is this the chair of the abbot?’

‘No, of the Maharajah, when the council of ministers have a meeting or when governors from far away countries come to visit. Would you not like to become Maharajah?’

‘No! For he is mighty and rich, is he not?’

‘Are riches and might not what everyone likes?’

‘No, the monks in the Khemavana do not, those of the Veluvana do not, and those of the Jetavana do not⁶. A sramana, a follower of the Tathagata, wants to be poor, to be a beggar; he owns nothing but his clothes, an alms bowl, and a staff.’

‘Horrible!’

‘Horrible? It is beautiful! The Tathagata left all his riches to become a bhikshu. Then they can take nothing away from him. You need gatekeepers and palace-guards and soldiers with arrows and spears and a hell. Assaji says they have to take care of the security in the palace and the riches of the Maharajah. When hunters or soldiers come at the Khemavana, I quickly take Sika to my home. Hunters and soldiers are sinners because they kill others. They can never be bhikshus.’

‘But the Maharajah needs them, or else bad people, cheats, thieves, murderers and strangers, would be in charge in India. Then no monastery

would remain safe, and no deer would be safe in the woods. They would plunder the harvest of the Vaishyas, the earth would dry out in summer time, the pilgrims would be killed, the viharas burned, the temples destroyed. What would happen to the Khemavana, the Veluvana and the Jetavana? Ruins and burial grounds ... if the Maharajah did not have the power or the soldiers.'

'And the riches?'

'And riches to pay all his servants who carry out his orders.'

Nigrodha placed himself on the ivory throne, crossed his legs, and reflected, to bring together Sagata's and Ashoka's different opinions. He did not succeed.

'But Sagata teaches us not to kill. In the monsoon all people stay inside their huts as much as possible, because then there grow so many young plants and animals. They could be trampled. And one who venerates the Buddha does not wish that. Do you not think it awful to be Maharajah?'

'No, I believe it is beautiful to be able to take care of all, of you too, and Sagata, and your mother and the great empire, to protect those who are weak.'

'With arrow and bow, and ...'

'And chakra and sword and soldiers and chariots.'

'Ah, that is a pity. Then you can never become a bhikshu and reach Nirvana.'

'Is that such a pity?'

'In Nirvana you are even much happier than in the Khemavana! Do people in Pataliputra kill people or animals or plants?'

'Yes, sometimes. In the slaughter-house, one kills many animals to provide meat to all the people of the palace and the Brahmin-court.'

'Horrible! In the Khemavana, never. Or, it happens only by accident. You know why? Because they have pity on them; Sika, too, my deer. Do people here take away things that do not belong to them?'

'Yes, sometimes.'

'In the Khemavana, never. Gautama Buddha left behind all that he possessed and became a beggar who owned nothing and did not want to own anything. And because of that he could bring happiness to the world. Do people marry here?'

'Yes, nearly all.'

‘In the Khemavana, never, but I do not know why. My mother has married, too. Does one speak untruth here or are people unfriendly?’

‘Too often, badly enough.’

‘Not in the Khemavana. The Tathagata never spoke words that were not friendly or untrue. Does one drink here intoxicating spirits?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘In the Khemavana, never, because they prevent right thinking, says Father Sagata.’

‘But why do they have to refrain from so many things they like?’

‘Father Sagata says: it is for the welfare of all beings and brings us happiness too, because they are the first steps on the holy eightfold path of the Buddha that leads to Nirvana.’

‘Then you are right. It is a pity that I can never become a bhikshu.’

‘But maybe, you can become upasaka.’

‘Is he permitted to live in the Khemavana, too? And be married, or speak falsehood or drink spirits, or steal and kill?’

‘No. But he is allowed to come to *pratimoksha*⁷, and the full-moon and the new-moon festival, to listen to Father Sagata’s discourses about the Tathagata.’

‘Do I then reach Nirvana, too?’

‘That I do not know.’

‘May I then remain the army chief, the leader of all the soldiers?’

The little arhat looked timid.

‘I don’t think so. Would you then become upasaka of the Buddha?’

‘If that is possible?’

‘I shall warn Sagata and the bhikshus, shall I? I will ask them to tell you, if an upasaka is allowed to be Maharajah?’

‘Rather, ask if a Maharajah is allowed to become an upasaka.’

‘Yes, let us call for Assaji. I will ask Father Sagata right away.’

‘I will first take you with me to the ladies’ quarters.’

‘Ladies’ quarters?’

‘Yes, there lives my family. The Agramahisi and my other wives, the Princes and the Princesses.’

‘Women?’

‘Yes, you can have some food and drinks there, before you return to the Khemavana. What do you like best: meat, cakes, rice with ghee and sugar, mango juice, fruits?’

‘Meat! No, that I don’t eat! Do you?’ Ashoka nodded. Nigrodha looked so worried that the Maharajah smiled.

Asandhimitra was enchanted by the serious little boy, gave him honey cakes, sugar and delicious mango juice. It comforted Nigrodha that the Maharani never ate meat or used intoxicating spirits, did not hunt and did not lead an army. When Assaji wanted to return him to Aradi, he walked in a wide circle around the armed palace-guards.

‘I think Father Sagata will agree that you become upasaka! And the Maharani upasika!’

‘If you ask him, I think so too, my ‘little arhat’.’

Ashoka watched him go and stood for a while, lost in thought.

‘Piyadasi is touched by so much loveliness.’

‘If the Buddha has such an influence on the attitude of all his followers, then we cannot stay behind, Asandhi. Kullika has not been able to make clear to me that the faith of the Buddha with its many jealous sects, and its doctrine of non-violence towards man and even animals of prey, could bring unity in my world-empire. An empire necessarily requires regulation, for regulation is required power, power requires the means of power, and that, Asandhi, inevitably includes use of those means of power, and in many cases a firm use. That is an iron law, Asandhi. Kullika and I came to the conclusion that the teachings of the Buddha offer most of the elements for a right development towards that, which we have made our highest objective. Looking for the sara of all religions and sects, it is always the teachings of the son of the Shakyas that reveal the path. Can it be possible, one doctrine for all people? I have always rejected Buddha’s teachings as unpractical for me. But if they could turn the attitude of my peoples to that of the Khemavana, like Nigrodha revealed it to me in all its simplicity, then we have to search diligently, Asandhi, and set out clearly what the teachings of the Buddha are, so that no heresy is possible any longer. And the sects decline. Maybe, that then ... It would be too beautiful!’

‘For my great Maharajah, nothing is too beautiful.’

‘Will the peoples of India ever be able to devote themselves to the Buddha, who sacrificed his body to save tigers from starvation, who wanted

to sacrifice himself as the deer-king for the pregnant deer at the deer park in Kashi? Who, as Vessantara, gave up all that he possessed to bring welfare to the people instead of directing his meditations on his own well-being, his own salvation!’

‘Do you consider it necessary that Sayana becomes a Buddhist *sramana*, as well as Brahmagupta and Khallataka and Vimalamitra?’

‘I know now, Asandhi: ‘He, who looks for truth, finds many truths’. Every faith can be valued when it accepts, in all sincerity, the sara of all religions, what can only be the unfolding of the Atman. But our people require of the Buddha his tolerance towards all, and relentlessness against the selfish wishes of others.

‘Who has to judge that?’

‘People who have the attitude of a Sayana, a Kullika, or a Khallataka.’

‘And my Maharajah?’

‘Possibly, if his Agramahisi binds a delicate-blue scarf over his third eye.’



THE WAY OF THE BUDDHA

A radi could not silence her unrest. Angrily, she blamed herself: How could she have entrusted her greatest treasure to Assaji? It was the first time in seven years that she had handed Nigrodha to the care of someone else. And that, too, to him whom she had cursed the most in her life. The air of kindness in the Khemavana towards all that lived, had softened her feelings towards the Maharajah, but not taken away the fear of his inexorable thirst for power that spared no one, not even his brothers. Why should his fear of Nigrodha, the rightful heir, hold him back? No, Assaji was right: then he would have taken him long ago! Ashoka, the Righteous, Lord of life and death, who cherishes life, who places truth over all other virtues ... Devi from Vidisha, Asandhimitra. Was it divine justice that Sumana fell? The world of lies and deceit, greed and assassination. But that hell! If only Assaji would return with her dearest!

*O, Sun goddess!
Queen of heaven and earth,
You, who give Light,
You, who give Strength,
Holy thou art! ...
Halt on thy path,*

*Light your rays on him whose road,
Is leading to the Khemavana.
Give me back my son!
Oh, that hell ... that hell of Ashoka!*

‘Sarita, Sarita, my bathing-clothes!’
Aradi allowed the water of the purple lotus pond to be poured over her hot limbs.

*O, Lotus of the Dharma¹
Protect my son against his hell!
Water of this holy lotus-pond,
Cleanse my sins,
So, no chastisement will befall him! ...*

Nigrodha came running through the park, speaking excitedly. ‘Mother, Mother! The Maharajah wants to become a follower of the Buddha! Not a bhikshu but an upasaka. Assaji and I have come here on Jampa. Jampa is the biggest elephant of the Maharajah.’

Aradi hugged her little son.

‘Well, my boy, that is fine.’

‘But Father Sagata has to go to the Maharajah, and the bhikshus.’

‘Then go and warn Father Sagata and the bhikshus.’

Sumana, descending from a fairytale-Prince to a spineless priest-clown, pushed forward by uncontrollable self-indulgence. Ashoka, ascending up from a wild brute that spares no one, to the eminence of holy humaneness. And she, like a silly butterfly, had let herself be seduced by glitter and sheen. The daughter of a forest-hermit from the jungle, on the golden throne? How could she ever keep under restraint her envy, her hate! Nirvana. Letting go of mortal desires, of hate ...

When the next day, Sagata, followed by thirty sramanas, all in saffron robes, entered the park by the great gate, the news flowed like a current through the palace. In the anthapura the residents grouped together and in heated whispers, betrayed their excitement. At the Brahmin-court, one kept anxiously silent with every fragment of information that came.

The monks went to the great audience hall. Soon, the Maharajah appeared, together with the Agramahisi and the uparaja Tishia. Sagata and

the monks explained to them the doctrine of the Tathagata, the life of the Awakened, Accomplished Buddha.

‘I thank you, venerable Sagata, that you and the venerable sramanas have wanted to present to me such an attractive picture of the life of the Buddha and the Dharma. For me, as Maharajah of a great empire, it is important though to know, what the Tathagata can mean for my peoples. As sramanas you are not allowed to work for money, as a bhikshu² you have to offer your begging-bowl to others, so that they get the opportunity to perform to you their benevolence. But what if all, even the largest part of humanity, should become bhikshus! And that is what you wish, is it not? In Brahmanism there is a social role for the whole of humanity, in spite of its rigidity. Your doctrine means, in principle, the end of humanity, because a follower of the Buddha refrains from manual labour for livelihood and from marriage. What is a beautiful flower when she bears no fruit, else, but a mere fleeting caress to the eye?’

‘The family is the foundation of the empire and for the bhikshu you wish to remove the family. Like the Buddha he leaves his family and lives without a home,’ Tishia added.

‘It is a part of human nature to found a family, holy Maharajah. Only a few will be able to walk the difficult path of the Buddha. Is not the human being bound through his senses—like the strong vines—to a life that is transient in all its fibres? Only for the bhikshu does it mean a cutting-off of all these bindings, to shut the doorways of the senses. What other people call ‘to be’ is for him ‘becoming’, thus ephemeral. Only by the difficult path of meditation, growing awareness and liberation, is the supreme state of ‘be-ing’ to be reached by him, usually only after many incarnations. The desire for that state is also a desire, a negative one. Only the true bhikshu turns away from all that is not eternal. All that is sought from other human beings is respect for all life, no-thieving, and chastity. But here lies the dividing line for the bhikshu; of him is demanded sexual abstinence and purity of body, speech and thought. This precept—for that is man’s nature—is only followed by the very few, whose wish for Nirvana is stronger than that for life. But life itself is viewed as joyous. From the others, the Buddha asks fidelity amongst spouses and avoidance of indecency, but for them Nirvana cannot be attained in this incarnation. They can become upasakas and live in the ambience from which the young adherent can follow his road to liberation. Whosoever observes the precept of truth and abstains from

intoxicating spirits as well, has taken his first step on the holy path of the Buddha. Thus, the Tathagata has wanted to create for all people a road upwards: an 'ever becoming' on the distinguished ascending path to Nirvana. Only through being human is there the road to eternal bliss, for men and devas as well as for gods. They, who create the right attitude, observe the five precepts or the *sila*, are upasakas, for whom the 'ever changing' is 'becoming', but for whom the awareness of the eternal remains alive: the awareness that there is a way out through meditation, spiritual growth and liberation, to Nirvana, not to be described in earthly words: the way of the Buddha. Nothing though, prevents the bhikshu, at any moment of his life, to recognise and accept thus: 'I feel that the worldly life is of greater importance to me now'. Then, he can share his life again amongst the happy ones who walk the road, in the ambience of the right attitude: the upasakas, they who take seriously Buddha's sutra: 'Avoid all evil, set your heart on good, master your senses.' Self-discipline and a loving heart for all that lives, is what the Buddha asks from man. No varna, no people, no land, no riches, no social position, shuts off the way of the Buddha. For the ones who feign, who pretend, we turn our begging-bowl upside down, noble Maharajah. In Buddhism as much as in Brahmanism, it is about the balance in life, the social fulfilment, but without hate, without animosity. It is so clear, so simple and true, that the man of today, entangled in superficiality, in rites and rituals as animal sacrifice, overlooks the beauty of it, like the snake that is seeking its way in the darkness underneath the fallen-off leaves, in the flowering jungle of Vasanta.'

'Who cannot be an upasaka?'

'He, who acts against the *sila*, the five precepts. A deed has its worth only, insofar as it originates from an inner purity, reining the senses, passions and desires. The purification of the soul of ill-disposed urges and selfishness, is the most important precept.'

'And what about he who practises a different religion and yet follows the precepts of the Tathagata as well?' asked Tishia.

'No fire greater than lust, no imprisonment stronger than hatred, no web closer-knit than passion, no stream more forceful than craving, high Uparaja. He who extinguishes a spark of lust, who breaks a bar of the prison of hatred, who tears an opening in the net of passion, who turns the tide of a wave of desire, he puts one foot in the direction of the Buddha and is, according to the doctrine, already an upasaka or upasika. Sweeter than

the scent of sandal or *mogara*³, or the lotus or *vissaka*-flower, is the scent of a good deed. Like the foot-print of every living being fits in the foot-print of the elephant, so the sara of every religion fits within the Dharma of the Buddha, and thus its follower is an upasaka.'

'What vows do the upasaka and the upasika have to take?'

'No vows, gracious Maharajah. He who loves the Tathagata and his Dharma, takes, in the presence of a bhikshu, his refuge in the Buddha, in his teachings: the Dharma, in his community: the Sangha. That is all. The most glorious Realised Buddha seeks no obligations to himself, the gods or Nirvana; only deference for his teachings and the obligations towards one's self as well as for every living being. He, who conquers himself, is the unsurpassed vanquisher. Awareness is the road to immortality, unawareness the path to death.'

'Of what significance is it for my people, if I become upasaka and my beloved Agramahisi upasika?'

'Sire! When duty leads the human being through the jumbled, impenetrable jungle, does he then follow the path of the ant under the fallen-off leaves on the forest ground, or the path that the mighty elephant has mastered, straight through the dense woods?'

'And he, whose duty leads him beside of the path of the Buddha?'

'He has to find out for himself, by his own effort, how he should return to the right way along the eightfold path of the golden middle, the path that avoids craving, but also unnecessary penance and self-torture.'

Ashoka looked up at Asandhimitra. A soft smile shone at him, like a white lotus-flower that for the first time unfolds its white purity towards the light of the rising Surya, breaking through the haze of the night. Ashoka stood up and took Asandhi's hand.

'Venerable Sagata, we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge in the Dharma, we take refuge in the Sangha.'⁴

'Then you are an upasaka and an upasika of the Sangha, gracious Maharajah and Maharani.'

'Then I would now like, as a devotee of the Buddha in Pataliputra, to found a sangharama⁵ for the sramanas of the Tathagata. Would you like to be the head of that convent, Sagata? Maybe, the Khemavana could become a convent for the nuns, so that Rani Aradi can live there for the rest of her life. We will try to get the Dharma of Buddhism accepted everywhere in my

empire, and do everything that will lead my subjects towards an understanding and acceptance. Therefore, is a closer tie needed between my government and the Sangha. The Sangharama of Pataliputra will be so large that during monsoon a great number of monks can stay in it, to go on their way again, after monsoon, to spread the teachings in my empire.'

'Gracious Maharajah, Your power at the service of the holy Tathagata will spread the light, kindled in Bodh Gaya, over the whole world.'

In the evening, Srigupta appeared before the Maharajah.

'High Majesty, we heard that a group of monks from the sect of the Buddha was invited to the palace by your Majesty.'

'I have joined the Sangha as upasaka, holy Srigupta.'

'The sect of Gautama is a heretic sect, O, Maharajah.'

'Heretic, you say, Srigupta? Is not the Sankhya, which rejects your gods and your Atman, or the teachings of the materialists, which reject everything besides matter, more heretic? Buddha recognises your forest hermitages in his convents, your karma in his migration of the soul, your All-spirit in his Nirvana, even your gods, as devas, happy souls in the celestial world.'

'Buddha preaches his doctrine not only to the Aryans, but to all, even to the cursed Mlecchas and Chandalas. That is heretical!'

'Can a doctrine be heretical because of the people to whom it is taught?'

'It is the secret doctrine of the Vedas; the Vedas forbid that it is taught to others than the twice-born.'

'Which Veda? Does not the Veda say: We were what you are; you will be what we are?'

'Gautama rejects the sacrifices and the laws.'

'The Sankhya too, the Upanishads as well. Are they heretical? They despise the pretentiousness of your work.'

'Gautama does not respect the varnas.'

'Your sages from the forest hermitages rejected the boundaries of the three castes a long time ago: *Tat Tvam Asi!* Is it then a wonder that the people look at the teachings of Gautama as salvation from a bad dream?'

'Gautama rejects the gods, Brahma!'

'No, Brahma begged the Buddha to preach his doctrine to the whole world. The Buddha reveres to be born human as a joy; you made it into a

painful road of sin. The Buddha wants to create the right attitude by speaking to the common sense in man; you seek the path of suffering through external practises: the thousand of rules of the varnas and the offerings. The Buddha wants truth, you want rituals performed by priests. The Buddha asks you to follow the teachings of love and compassion, whereas you are being hard-hearted to everyone except yourself. The Buddha wishes that people become responsible for their own salvation, while you wish that to be in the hands of a few sacrificial priests, for their own interest. You ask for a perfect dead form for your sacrifices, the Buddha asks for a perfect human being for Nirvana. And you call him a heretic?

And are you amazed that I, who was persecuted by your priests because I wanted the happiness of the peoples, follow the Buddha, who also wants the happiness of all my peoples? All people are like my children, and I as their father, Srigupta.'

'So, herewith the fate of the Brahmins is sealed.'

'I will respect any Brahmin, who like Sayana and Khallataka, like Vimalamitra and Brahmagupta, does honour the beauty and the greatness of Brahmanism.'

'That means there will be no room anymore for the sacrificial priests.'

'I have made the ones who were until now the true gods of Aryavarta into false gods, Srigupta. I will have built a great Sangharama for the sramanas, who will bring to my peoples the doctrine of compassion.'

'You may pray that the gods do not punish you and your country, O, Maharajah.'

'The gods punish those who fear them. He who goes the way of the Buddha, does not know fear, does not believe in punishment, or it must be the punishment by the insulted sacrificial priests. And against that we have our measures.'

In the city the news spread that the Maharajah had become an upasaka of the Buddha, and the Brahmin sacrificial priests had to leave the court.

'The Maharajah is right. Who wants to feed and clothe and give gifts to the Brahmins who still would rather not see him on the throne?'

'It has happened more often that mighty kings had to give way to the priests.'

‘Because the people helped them. That is not the case now!’

‘The people have had enough of the killers and fire-raisers.’

‘Take care of what you are saying. A priest does not kill and does not raise a fire.’

‘No, he orders someone else to do it. If the Maharajah becomes a follower of the Buddha, then we will become likewise. He is more truthful, more righteous, and mightier than all those sacrificial sprites; he is Shiva! They never made sacrifices for him anymore but lived on his gifts.’

‘They performed a benefaction by giving the Maharajah the opportunity to take care of them.’ Thunderous laughter followed.

‘How Pataliputra has changed that it laughs about its priests!’

‘How the priests have changed. They take benefactions from Maharajah Ashoka, whom they cursed!’

‘For a sacrificial priest the fee is always too meagre.’

Behind them, at some distance, stood a small group of people, who, in the eyes of the Brahmin society, were the scum: sweepers, barbers and hetaera who had had their days, and other disrespected women, thieves, robbers and fallen actors. They had sneaked in stealthily from the slums: Shudras and Chandalas, with the stamp of outcast in their eyes, their posture, their garb.

‘Why has the Maharajah become a Buddhist?’

‘Because he is fed up with the Brahmins.’

‘You say it! And what about minister Khallataka and the holy Sayana?’

‘He is fed up with the sacrificial priests,’ a Shudra thought aloud. ‘They will be chased away from the Brahmin-court.’

‘The holy Maharajah does not fear them and sentences them just like the others.’

‘The Maharajah became a Buddhist because he is righteous and views the Shudras and Chandalas as human beings, and not, as the priests do, as animals in a human body,’ remarked a Chandala, the most despised, being born of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman.

‘Maybe, we will also be allowed to put on yellow robes now, and play at being monks,’ mocked an actor.

‘Go on mocking, you! As long as we keep a distance so they cannot touch us,’ an old haetere said. ‘When we are young and fresh we may enter the gardens of the Kama-temple to serve their lusts. Now we are impure and

untouchable! In the slums we are at home, in the streets we have to keep a distance or they kick us out of their way.'

'The Buddha did not care about varna. You know that a sweeper, a despised Shudra, became one of his pupils. The most beloved disciple of the Buddha was Ananda. Once, when he was thirsty, he asked a girl he saw at a well, for water. The girl said she was a Chandala and could not approach him without polluting him. Ananda answered: 'My sister, I do not ask you about your varna, neither about your family, I ask for water, if you can give that to me'. She became a Buddhist. 'I know,' the actor said, 'a song of the courtesan, Vimala, who was accepted into Buddha's commune:

*Enchanting because of my beauty and figure,
By the power of my charm and my fame,
In reckless pride of flowering youth,
I looked down upon all other women,
With bright splendour I enveloped my body,
Speaking its language to the fools.
So, I stood at the gate of the house of haetere,
Like the hunter, putting out the snares for his game.
I showed the crowd the splendour of my garb,
I unveiled the enticement, not hidden by shame.
Thus performing my many arts,
I was deceiving the bunch of lusty madmen.
Now I walk with the begging bowl and collect,
With bare head, in the nun's robe,
And I seat myself at the roots of the trees,
Share the depths beyond the mind ...
Finished are my endeavours,
Let heaven or earth be its aim.
Every vice has ended,
Cool my heart became ... I am at peace.⁶*

'I heard that the physician Ratnaka who was killed, a Shudra, was a great friend of the holy Maharajah. The drama-player Talaputra became a monk of the Sangha.'

‘The Buddha is long dead and forgotten,’ a man cut in, a pariah because his father, a Vaishya, married a Brahmin woman.

‘The Maharajah became a Buddhist, they say, so that all his subjects, Arya and Mleccha, will respect the Tathagata and will be respected themselves. Therefore, he does not require the arrogant priests anymore.’

‘Look, there!’

‘Look there! A group of priests is leaving the park. They are weighed down with valuables!’

‘Gold does not carry the scent of the giver!’

The closer the priests approached, the quieter the rows of onlookers became. Troops of horse soldiers rode alongside the road, to take care that the curious onlookers would not trouble the priests.

‘The holy Maharajah will prevent them from inciting the people. See how serious they appear, as if their beloved is being burnt. Why are you crying?’ the speaker continued, talking to a few Vaishya women who were struck by the sad retreat.

‘What did the holy priests do that they are chased away so mercilessly?’

‘What did they do? They did nothing! Now they are doing something, they are taking their hoarded treasures to safety.’

‘Shame on you!’ others called out. ‘You will soon regret your desecration! Do you know what disasters await us because of this shame done to the gods?’

‘I will do penance not to go to their hell! Greetings, holy Srigupta, may I carry your heavy treasures?’

Srigupta halted, and looked at the mocker, who withdrew. That success though was not enough for the priest. He walked up to him.

‘Woe to the people who mock their priests!’

Some of the onlookers took on a posture of humility, one even fell to his knees and bowed to the ground, but a few boys mirthfully jumped on his back.

‘Woe to the priests who only take care of their treasures!’

A boy, who was eating a banana, threw the yellow peel exactly on top of Srigupta’s hoard: ‘A little more gold!’

Srigupta blanched, his eyes flashing in anger. He raised his free hand towards the people who themselves were startled at this brazen mischief.

‘Cursed are you, wretched ones! An earthquake will swallow you into the deepest hell! Your touch will infect and poison!’ All kept silent and many trembled at the priest’s curse that still had its effect. A group of horse soldiers swept aside the spectators.

Sivi, Anu and their adherents remained in the court, inclined to follow the Maharajah in his conversion. Some days later, monks in saffron robes moved into the dwellings of the priests. Sagata became the head of the abbey. He consulted with the master builders of the Maharajah, on how the new Sangharama should be designed.



THEN ONE THROWS HIGHER

‘Maskarin, I have to know the plans they are devising against me in Kalinga.’

‘They are very much on their guard over there, O, Maharajah.’

‘You play excellently the penitent, my Maskarin. If there is danger, I can give you some very reliable warriors to go along with you as pilgrims.’

‘It is the danger that is the charm of our profession, Sire. My Salya was successful. Then one throws higher! Do you wish me to take a stand for peace or for war?’

‘Do whatever the situation prompts you to do. I do not desire a war with these fools but it appears to be inevitable. It makes no difference whether it were to happen now or in the next five years. For me it is important to know what is happening in that country.’

A few days later, several groups of pilgrims left the city to begin the journey to Tosali, the capital of Kalinga. At night they stayed in a communal camp, where Maskarin told them about the existing situation and the roads. He shared with them his plan and explained the dangers involved. Finally, they approached the hostile country by different routes and were

joined up in Tosali. They succeeded in gaining the trust of the people of Kalinga by presenting themselves as faithful people from Magadha, who were resentful about the Maharajah joining the Buddhist sect. This was already known in Tosali because several priests from the Brahmin-court had earlier made their way to the Kalingas. Meanwhile, Maskarin looked at all the penitents he could find in the vicinity of the capital; there were plenty of them. For his purpose he needed someone who looked exactly like him. At last, he discovered Muta. For several days his whole attention was concentrated on him. Maskarin's friends also visited the penitent at various times. Muta lived not far from the city, under a pippala-tree, at the rear of which was built his thatched hut.

Muta was renowned as an ascetic and fortune-teller. Even high government employees and the Raja liked his judgements because he never allowed himself to be swayed by either power or position.

Late one evening—as the dark starlight slowly turned bluish under the rays of the rising moon which threw its light on the entrance to Muta's hut—two men grabbed the penitent. He woke up, startled, attempted to free himself but failed. A menacing knife was aimed at his breast by a third soldier.

'Put on this pilgrim's clothes. If you call out, your sojourn on earth is finished.'

'What do you want of me?'

'Put the clothes on and follow us.'

'Cursed are you, denigrators of Brahmins!'

Blindfolded, he was led away in an ox-cart in the direction of Madhyadesa.

The following morning at daybreak, Muta, eyes staring, immobile, even more silent, was again sitting under the rustling leaves of the pippala-tree. Young maidens fetched him the finest of fruits, trying to entice him to tell sweet secrets about their future and women placed milk, rice and ghee in front of him, wanting to know whether a son or a daughter would be born to them or if their daughters would secure the right husband. Word about Muta's fame was spreading. From far and near from the land of the Kalingas, people came to him. As secretive as people were with strangers—the Raja did forbid them under threat of death from supplying any information to strangers—as talkative they were towards the ascetic, who

enjoyed the trust of the subjects and their king who, after all, was one with his people.

One day, a simple Brahmin came to see him.

‘Holy Muta, my heart aches because of what is happening in the Kalingas. Let me spill it out for you, one bestowed with great wisdom. All that is right and proper is being trampled on in our country, and all in name of the gods.’

‘What do you call proper, noble Brahmin?’

‘Partaking in all the good things and the duties of the people, since evil as well as neglect of duty is improper.’

‘Nowadays one teaches, proper is what is to the advantage of the people!’

‘Yes, yes, Maharajah Ashoka has turned into a Buddhist so Kalinga has to resurrect the ancient faith. We know these misleading words: The gods are safe only in Kalinga! So, they will assist the Kalingas and the blame is turned fully towards Ashoka, thus one is lying! The gods will stand behind the strongest ones, Muta, so make yourself strong! The whole country has to rally around to defend and to attack. He who opposes this violation of our sacred laws is a traitor. Stand firm against the godless heretic! Pretend you want peace but gird yourself for war! Be false and deceitful, if the needs of your country require it! They want the countries that have as yet not followed the heretical views of the Buddha to be annexed to the Kalingas: Suhma, Banga, Anga. And then cast their greedy eyes on Magadha and Videha. These countries belong to the gods, do they not, and so now to Kalinga. Every young man has to prepare himself for war, although our sacred laws forbid it, as though everyone is a Kshatriya! Everyone has to contribute his wealth to the heavy war taxes and everywhere there have sprouted large exercise grounds and workshops for weapons. That is how it is, Muta. This violation of our sacred rules only started after those power-hungry followers of Prince Sumana came from Mahyadesa to our country. They incited the King and the governors of the country against Pataliputra!’

‘The wild heretic is a danger to Kalinga!’

‘But, Muta! Buddhism can only lessen the danger! The Buddhist does not want war! And what about Ashoka’s power? What stopped him from taking over the weak Kalinga years ago? It is because of the exhortations of

these power-hungry ones, the vengeance that is afire in the heads of the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins who have fled from Magadha.'

'Whosoever wants to win, needs to know the game, holy Brahmin.'

'But what happens if one makes up the game, merely for the sake of winning, Muta? Prince Sarata and the priest Shakuni are making a band of predators of our people, with no human feelings left anymore! No mercy for the enemy, only unrelenting warfare. Each killing, each slander, each injury weakens his power: so kill, so slander and injure him! How great will our people become once we are in power. It is one great runaway war-frenzy, Holy Muta! An outlander Prince who dictates our laws, an exiled Brahmin from Magadha, who preaches bottomless hatred ... Muta, how will this end?

'Did you warn the Raja about the great power of Ashoka?'

'The people ridicule me! They think that they are by far superior with their contempt for death, with their cruelty, their indomitableness, their stubbornness. The Raja casts eyes at the ivory tower of Pataliputra. One buys herds of elephants in Yakshapura and Manipura¹ on the other side of the sea.'

'You forget, Brahmin, that Buddhism is heresy.'

'Foolishness! Like all the other sects it comes and goes again and Brahmanism remains. One joyfully shouts here that the throne-thief is making himself powerless because of Buddha's sutra – Thou shalt not kill! Will there be a war, Muta?'

Muta stared into the future. 'Yes!'

'Right. I am not concerned whether Kalinga wins or loses. All gain and harm through war means a loss for the people. Are the priests performing offerings to ask for fertility and prosperity from the gods, Muta? No, they ask for their powers to be increased! Will the Kshatriyas protect our country? No, they want to expand the power of the king for their own advantage! Will the Vaishyas take care of our food? No, they are going to war! Will the Shudras serve the other varnas? No, they serve the people who will acquire power! All for the sake of the war against the Maharajah, whose power they earlier desired from the hands of the weakling, Sumana. Thus, all values of our eternal laws are destroyed, and the folly of their power-greedy endeavours becomes the truth. Where will all this end, Muta?'

Some days later Muta was visited by Prince Sarata and Shakuni.

‘What is it that the holy Muta forecasts about the war with Magadha?’

‘You wish to hear the truth?’

‘We are only interested in what the holy Muta forecasts for the people of Kalinga.’

‘I only foretell what is true.’

‘What is true? In Magadha it is true what the Buddha says, earlier the Vedas. Thousands of things are truth to one but falsehood to another!’

‘What then do you call true, holy Shakuni?’

‘Truth is what enhances or can enhance the power of the country.’

‘So, truth is that the Maharajah of Aryavarta is a weakling.’

‘Better speak about the impotent one.’

‘So, the truth is that the Kalingan army is stronger than that of Ashoka’s!’

‘Certainly. In number we may be smaller but our army will not spare the enemy, it will sacrifice its life to inflict any harm on the Maharajah. And the gods ally themselves on our side.’

‘Just as it was in the days of Sumana?’

‘My oldest brother was mad because he failed to understand what was true.’

‘So, the truth is that your older brother was mad hence Ashoka naturally was accepted as the one to be the Maharajah.’ Sarata flushed.

‘Ashoka would have been defeated if Sumana had realised where he stood, penitent!’

‘And you are simple enough to believe that the Maharajah did not know about the sacrifice of the twelve priests and the twelve sramanas?’

Shakuni flared up. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I am a fortune-teller and thus all-knowing!’

‘Kalinga needs sages who know what strengthens the faith and empowerment of the king and his army. The gods help those who have the power!’

‘That is why the gods assisted Ashoka against his brothers and Sela against Sampadi.’

‘That is only on the surface. The truth is that Kalinga plays host to the gods, feeds them and quenches their thirst with sacrifices so we can trust

them.'

'So, that is how Sumana, Aradi and the council could place their trust on ...'

'Foolishness! The truth is that Ashoka has become impotent because of his Buddhism so that our army is now the strongest in the world! The gods bide their time. That is the truth and it will lead us to power! Do you understand that well, Muta?'

'And if I foresee a different truth?'

'Priests who cannot bring their ideas in line with that of the rulers of the people have to disappear,' Shakuni said coldly. 'We do not tolerate heretics here like they do in Magadha. Once Kalinga rules, we will annihilate them.'

'And the ideas of the rulers are determined?'

'Certainly, we determine them ourselves! Were you to refuse them you would be cast aside. We will not let ourselves be thwarted by sages under pippalas. Moreover, there are many other sages who do know the rightful truth!'

'And the people of Kalinga?'

'Kalinga is the people and the people, Kalinga; and I am its chief priest. The one mighty god now is: victory!'

'I do not think of harming our own country but I know that once again a Prince of the Mauryas underestimates the power of the Maharajah. His successes do not only deal with peaceful labour. Do you know the army camps of Pataliputra?'

'You can leave that to us, holy Muta. We demand of you that you be convinced of our view and act accordingly, in case the Raja were to consult you. I am a priest.'

'Do find out and in secret what the Maharajah is doing to prepare his army.'

'Many from Magadha came here, so we know.'

'Send out the spies!'

'Spies betray both sides to get a double advantage.'

'Think of the mahamatra of the Sodra border. He has made a marriage proposal to the daughter of Ashoka in vain.' Shakuni's ears seemed to perk up sharply.

'What is his name?'

'Rauma.'

‘A Brahmin?’

‘Yes.’

‘As reliable as his master?’

Muta kept silent.

Soon, he was summoned to appear before the Raja. He sent an answer that his karma would not permit him to leave the holy place. The Raja, having understood the suggestion that had been given, rode on his elephant to the ascetic’s abode under the pippala.

‘Holy Muta, who will win the battle between Kalinga and Magadha?’

‘The Raja of Kalinga attempts to make his army an invincible power. The gods will bless the ones who deserve it, Gracious King.’

‘When will it be the auspicious time to begin the war, holy Muta?’

‘The Maharajah weakens his powers the more he loses himself in the new doctrine. The longer you wait, the more will fortune act in your benefit.’

‘But the longer I wait, the more my country will be impoverished. No King can carry on like that, unless he enlarges his dominions and brings his land in conformity with his army. Otherwise, his dominions will be either an elephant with the legs of a deer, a huge banyan with the stem of a bamboo or an eagle with the wings of a parakeet.’

‘Would it not be more harmonious if the honoured Raja were to prune down his army in proportion to his country? A stranger easily takes risks with a strange people but a King cannot shape his actions according to a stranger’s views.’

‘You think that the gods condemn my endeavours.’

‘He who wants to establish a great kingdom is not praised for his endeavours but for his success; one does not condemn him for his cruelty against peoples and monarchs but for his miscalculations, his lack of wisdom: Which mongoose will trample an elephant, which ear of wheat cast its shadows over an areka-palm, which human being will conquer a god!’

‘Do I do well to prepare for battle for the sake of the gods of Aryavarta?’

‘Sir, I am a fortune-teller, I predict the future. I do not take it upon myself to pass judgements. Let he who starts the war reap the rewards and accept the burden of the consequences: death and pestilence. And may he

who cherishes peace, warm himself in the happiness of his people. The arbiter in this life is your own atman, after your death, the eternal Atman. You must decide about your people, not the foreigner.'

'My army will be invincible.'

'The army of the Maharajah is huge and strong, yours is huge and strong like the bull of Shiva. Cut off his head and he is lost; cut off a horn and with the other one he will kill the attacker.'

The King explained lengthily and Muta asked as much.

When the King had returned to the palace, he summoned Prince Sarata and Shakuni. He informed them about all his new objections. Both the Magadhans knew that they had to convince him anew that the Kalingas could be the only victor against the powerless Maharajah. But as soon as they returned home, they organised a meeting of the most important Brahmins of Pataliputra. There, Muta was sentenced to death by drowning in the crocodile pond, as he was found guilty of obstructing the work of the gods.

During the night a dozen soldiers overpowered Muta and brought him in an ox-cart to the city. He was taken to a remote lotus-pool.

'Take a bath, holy Muta, before we talk with each other.'

'I only bathe myself in my hut.'

'This time you will have to do it in the holy pond. You betray your country. You have to purify yourself for that calumny.'

The penitent understood the intention of Shakuni. He sensed the hooded eyes of a giant crocodile. Its head was just above the water. Muta kept staring ahead, motionless, seemingly preoccupied, but appraising the danger anticipated. Then he turned around.

'Cursed are you, Shakuni, despicable tyrant of a gang of assassins who wishes to sacrifice our hard-working people out of your selfish hate!'

'Hurry up. Else, we will have to ask two Shudras to force you. My hand will not touch you. I am a priest.'

'Take a bath, holy Muta,' Prince Sarata added now.

'And cursed are you too, Maurya; you will be amongst the first ones to be killed in the war that you initiate over our poor people. Both of you are like the crocodiles there basking between the white lotuses.'

Muta then stepped into the pool and with a terrified cry he disappeared under the surface, as the crocodile submerged, too. There was violent

movement, then the water turned calm. The other two moved away, silently.

The next morning Muta was seated again in his regular place under the pippala-tree. Briefly he told his pupil what had happened.

‘That was a dangerous adventure, sir.’

‘Not so bad. The only thing is that one has to dive and swim better than a crocodile. Before diving I had spotted a place underneath the lotus-leaves. Evidently, the crocodile was a wise one, who seemed to have more respect for the robe of a penitent than the priest Shakuni. Perhaps, he had already been fed enough by the Magadhan friends of the Raja. And I was armed with a razor-sharp knife as one always has to be prepared.’

‘And now?’

‘Travel as fast as possible to Rauma, inform him twice, and bring twenty horse-soldiers here from Kosala all disguised as pilgrims.’

Again, the King came to Muta and bowed before the penitent, who was then practising his yoga and did not seem to notice the Raja. At last, the ascetic emerged from his exertions.

‘Gracious Raja, I hope you did not have to wait too long.’

‘I did not want to disturb you, holy Muta, from what is loftier than worldly interests.’

‘For a king foremost among his interests should be the happiness of his people.’

‘Do I do well for these interests, if I conquer Suhma, Anga and Banga, which do belong to the gods? It is for the gods, my Muta.’

‘I am a fortune-teller, gracious Raja, and do not desire to speak for the gods.’

‘Will I succeed in conquering them?’

‘No. Ashoka will not tolerate even a handful of earth being taken away from him.’

‘Ashoka is a Buddhist; he is not allowed to kill.’

‘But he is a strong Maharajah.’

‘Will he lead his army himself?’

‘He has very capable army chiefs.’

‘Is there a chance that he himself will fall in battle?’

Muta was startled.

‘Prince Sarata should know that there is no chance of that happening.’

‘With a surprise attack.’

‘Ashoka has never let himself be taken by surprise.’ ‘What is your advice, holy Muta?’

‘Expel the foreigners and make friends with the Maharajah.’

‘My people have been brought up for years with hatred for the throne-thief.’

‘Maharajah Bindusara knew who he chose as his successor. Aryavarta is flowering. Can you say that about the Kalingas, High Raja?’

‘What do you predict, holy Muta?’

‘Your fall.’

‘My fall?’ The Raja was startled. ‘Holy Muta, all fortune-tellers talk to me about victory.’

‘Shakuni and Sarata wanted to force me, too, to forecast a victory for you.’

Towards nightfall, both the Magadhans came again. ‘So, you survived, Muta.’

Muta betrayed neither with movement nor with a glance that he had noticed the presence of the two men.

‘You predict the fall of Kalinga to the Raja. So, you betrayed Kalinga again! The army will be defeated! You are the sole one who encourages the indecisiveness of the King, you, traitor! The whole population is united to defeat the heretic. We, the army commander and the highest priest of Kalinga, sentence you to death by drowning in the Mahanadi. Or, do you as yet want to predict success for the King in the coming battle?’

Muta did not reply with a single word to Shakuni’s threat. With eyes that ranged far, he looked into infinite space as if the threat was not even meant for him.

‘So, you refuse!’

Shakuni signalled with a whistle. A few riders approached with an ox-cart.

‘It is your own choice, Muta. Give thought yet and we will leave you to your peace!’

Muta persisted in his motionless state. Suddenly, some twenty soldiers appeared from the woods, their heavy arrows pointed at the visitors.

A short, fierce battle followed, in which all the Kalingans and two of Muta’s soldiers were killed. Shakuni and Sarata were overpowered. With all

speed they were led towards the border. Muta remained under the pippala-tree, unmoved and undisturbed. Even during the investigation that followed in the night, he persisted in his silence. Human deeds were out of his scope. The dead bodies indicated that it had to do with warriors from Magadha, so that most likely Shakuni and Sarata were abducted by soldiers of Ashoka.

‘Before sunrise, a hundred heavily armed riders to the border!’

After the troops had left, Muta threw aside his penitent’s clothes, took a horse that Sura had left behind for him and, a warrior now once more, rode into the dark night on the road to Magadha. Towards morning he caught up with the little band, ordered that both prisoners be left behind, and took flight as fast as possible.

In Tosali they could not understand the connection: Was Muta a traitor? After all, he had left without a trace. The soldiers told how a strange warrior had caught up with the group, thrown the captured ones out of the ox-cart, and had fled with the others in the direction of Magadha. They then returned to the capital. It was no longer difficult for Shakuni and Sarata to convince the Raja of Muta’s betrayal and their visions about the war.

Ashoka had chosen for Muta a pleasant place on the road to the army camps and had him heavily guarded day and night. One day, when Muta had accepted his fate since long and had resumed his spiritual practices at a quiet place, the ascetic was brought to the palace to the great auditorium-hall, where the Maharajah awaited him, surrounded by his ministers and other high employees. Muta stood erect before the ivory throne as if the meeting was not of interest to him.

‘Is the holy Muta content with his new living place?’

‘The Maharajah of Aryavarta does not fear the curse of an ascetic who has accumulated his karma sky-high.’

‘No. To me a power was given that leaves no place for fear. You, too, do not know it, I hear. But maybe, you and I can discuss certain things in the interest of the Kalingas.’

‘I am not interested in earthly affairs.’

‘You are a fortune-teller, and as such, are consulted by the Raja and his high servants?’

‘An ascetic also needs care taking and safe rest.’

‘Are they not earthly affairs? And the happiness of the Kalingas? Is the holy Muta indifferent to it like the barren rock is to the sun’s rays?’

‘That happiness is the concern of the King, O, Maharajah.’

Ashoka smiled at this overture. ‘And of the ascetics, who by means of their karma keep alive the most beautiful of what supports man in his life’s struggle, hope.’

For the first time the Maharajah noticed that the penitent made a gradual movement as though to bow and he smiled again.

‘And if that concern leads to the downfall of land and people?’ Ashoka continued.

‘No government consciously takes measures for its downfall.’

‘But factually!’

‘Do you know what is true?’

‘Truth is that which increases the power of Kalinga; that is the Kalingan truth. Another truth is that no country can conquer the empire of Chandragupta and Bindusara: that is the reality of Aryavatha, a certainty that is as certain as the night follows the day. What chance do you, counsel of the Raja, then give the army of the Kalingas? Against my army with its inexhaustible resources out of the whole of prosperous Aryavarta! The number? Unlimited is my army. Courage, mercilessness, disregard of death? I will give my army as much of it as it needs to destroy the Kalingan! Or, do Shakuni and Sarata think they can strike at me personally? Do you believe that, after the twenty-fold attempt of Sumana’s? And do you still believe in the help of the gods after the battle in front of the gates of Pataliputra? I do not want a war, holy Muta, I want peace in my countries. But when power-hungry or avenging Princes or priests want to unsettle that peace, I will destroy them.’

‘Protect peace with war, Maharajah?’

Ashoka smiled for the third time.

‘Protect peace for the sake of peace! To conquer, to root out the evil, if that is the ultimate demand for peace.’

‘Creation knows only struggle, might and desire. So, your war will be eternal.’

‘Creation is maya. Over it is the human Atman that will reign in step with the All-will. Shiva is the Lord of life and of death. But within that unity, the Lord of Life should order the law to the Lord of Death. Do you

believe that the human being within the depths of his being desires war? Do the people of Kalinga desire war, Muta? Or, is it the Raja, the Saratas, the Shakunis: the might, the revenge, the desire?’

‘Are you ... Shiva, Sire?’

‘I am an upasaka, a worshipper of the Buddha.’

Muta bowed his head.

The next morning the Maharajah appeared with his retinue at Muta’s and requested him to climb on and ride on the elephant, by his side. In silence, they took the penitent through the busy streets of Pataliputra, where weavers, potters, blacksmiths, painters, barbers, goldsmiths, jewellers, carpenters and cloth-dyers quietly worked; then on to the Ganga, where commerce pulsed in the big merchant-city, then to the farmlands, where the Vaishyas tilled the lands and harvested contently, then to the large royal herbal nurseries, and finally to the huge encampment of the army. Everywhere the people came running up to see the Maharajah and show him their greatest respect.

‘Is this prosperity to be found everywhere in your country, O, Maharajah?’

‘It is the kind of power which I am striving for, Muta: quiet goodness, silent joy, trust, work and truth that will kill the desire for power, one’s own ego.’

They rode along the Emperor’s road, along which thousands of warriors lined up at the first strike of the gong, to demonstrate their respect for the Maharajah. Muta’s awe grew as they rode on through the elephant-camps with its endless rows and pickets of very well-cared for animals, through a vast plain of war-chariots, horse-camps, which never seemed to end, then to the training grounds, where Ashoka staged an elaborately arranged mock battle, in which all the different units took part. Muta’s face darkened; the inspiration and enthusiasm under the eyes of the Maharajah, the untiring efforts, the giving-no-quarter, intoxicating elation of the battle, the deafening sounds of the acts of war, the quick attacks, the chariots with their span of four horses racing along, the earth-shaking stomping of the squads with massive elephants, all filled him with awe and fear for his native country.

When Sela, with his army, at last forced Sagka to give way, Ashoka raised his hand and suddenly all battle stopped. Ashoka whistled his

elephant-signal and some twenty huge war-elephants made their way from between the others. On another signal from the Maharajah they knelt on their forefeet before the high company, close to Ashoka and the penitent.

‘Children, back to your place,’ and the elephants ambled calmly back to the rows. ‘That is my personal bodyguard, holy Muta.’

After Girika and Sura had returned to the capital and had informed the Maharajah about their experiences in Kalinga, Ashoka received the penitent again in the palace.

‘Holy Muta, I will now give you the freedom to return to Kalinga. How do you prefer to travel, on horseback, on elephant, on ox-cart? My servants will accompany you to your pippala-tree, if you like.’

‘Give me the ox-cart, Sire, so that I can quietly reflect about what I have seen and heard in your empire.’

‘It is a Kalingan truth, holy Muta that you divided your person in Tosali into two Mutas, one of which remained in Kalinga, fulfilling your everyday tasks, while the other was here as you will come to know.’ The Maharajah had Maskarin come, again disguised completely as Muta. The penitent was startled when he saw his mirror-image, and was even more surprised when he discovered that the other had his voice, his demeanour and movements, too.

‘Who are you?’

‘Muta, and you?’

‘Muta. From where do you come?’

‘From Tosali, and you?’

‘From Tosali. What do you do over there?’

‘Telling the future and giving advice to the Raja, Shakuni and Sarata. And you?’

‘How long were you there?’

‘As long as you were absent from your holy place.’

‘And did the people believe you?’

‘No. What in Kalinga is a lie is truth in Magadha and truth is what we call a lie.’

‘And did the people let you tell their future?’

Maskarin related what he had gone through with Shakuni, Sarata and the Raja.

‘Then I left for Pataliputra in search of my second I. It is now your turn to seat yourself again under the pippala-tree.’ Muta reflected.

‘Ashoka raised his hand and Maskarin disappeared so fast that Muta hardly noticed. The penitent contemplated the strange appearance. He shook his head and finally accepted it as a miracle.

‘Tell your King what you think about a war between Kalinga and me, holy Muta. You may be aware that I will no longer allow Kalinga to be a threat to my empire in the east.’

‘Holy and gracious Maharajah, I now know the great perception you have of your task. But do not think that I will have any influence. In Kalinga they call themselves the protectors of the Vedic gods. The country and its people are forced towards a war that sets aside all laws, even the laws of the gods themselves. And that means that my words will fade away like the death-cry of a sannyasin in the jungle. May the gods protect our poor people, who detest war.’

‘A citizenry, that endures its rulers, bears their actions and accepts its consequences, is itself responsible, holy Muta.’

Muta let himself be taken by ox-cart to the border of his country. The rest of the way, he travelled on foot, and once again took his place under the softly quivering pippala-tree. From all sides people happily came towards him, brought him milk, ghee, rice and fruits. But Muta did not speak a word anymore, he pondered. When Ushas opened Surya’s gate for the new day, his decision was made. He bathed himself with pure water, brought to him from the river in brass jars. Towards the time that the Raja consulted with his ministers, he appeared at the palace in Tosali, passed by the guards in silence, and reached the auditorium, undisturbed. Startled, people looked up, and their frightened glances followed the penitent who came up very near the throne.

‘Honoured Raja, I wish to tell the truth to you and give you advice.’

‘Holy Muta, I did not ask for your counsel. Nor do I wish for it.’

‘Am I your slave, who has to answer only when you ask me? I do not come here because you asked me, but because the highest Will orders me to do so. By long torment and difficult yoga, I came to divine what is happening all around me. I divided myself into two Mutas, one of which performed his yoga under the pippala-tree.’

‘Did that one apparition stay all the time under the pippala-tree, holy Muta?’ Shakuni asked, barely concealing his mockery.

‘No, stranger in Kalinga, who misuses the hospitality of our land for selfish revenge and hatred, you and Prince Sarata sentenced me to death by leading me to the crocodile-pond to become food for the monster living there. My other part went to Pataliputra to learn about the dangers Kalinga could expect from the Maharajah of Aryavarta. Aryavarta has become as rich as Kalinga is poor and the people are as happy and content with the noble Maharajah as ours have fear of you, high Raja. The people are prosperous, as ours indigent, the army huge, mighty and as invincible as ours puny; one reveres the Emperor there as one here fears our King. The country is limitless in size and vigour, even as ours is small and insignificant. Will you risk war with a country that is inexhaustible in its resources and war-prepared troops? If you risk the war, high Raja, you and your country will be destroyed. I feel closely related to the atman of the gracious Maharajah, more than to that of the fugitive Magadhans in our country!’

‘With the throne-thief, you mean!’ Shakuni called out in temper.

‘A water bubble gurgling up from a dung pit thinks that his lustre is more precious than that of the brilliance of the temple *gopura*², which guides itself only towards Shiva on Mount Kailasha.’

‘And what predicts Magadha-Muta, who turned out to be a betrayer of his country, for me, a Prince of the Mauryas?’

‘What my other self already told you at the crocodile-pool: you will be one of the first to fall, because you are ruled by the two greatest sins of humanity: hatred and revenge. Remember, high Raja, that I have been able, more than once to give you advice, and that this will be the last counsel I will give to you: If you risk the war, you and your country will be destroyed! From now on, I wish so to live that my soul may enter Brahma-nirvanam.’

Muta turned around and left the hall under a seething silence. A wild story went through Kalinga-country about the miracle of the split-in-two Muta, even feared by the crocodiles to whom the evil demons had taken him, who flew through the air to Magadha, where Ashoka revered him, as did everyone who abhorred war with Kalinga. The Maharajah had offered him great treasures if he had wanted to stay in Magadha to spread his

blessings. But the holy Muta wished to return to his pippala. Now the two Mutas were united again and the pious Kalingans brought him their offerings. That was all that could bring them happiness because the holy Muta spoke no more.



DARK PORTENTS

In the mind of the Raja arose a scheme to win over Rauma. Guptika, a young commander, was chosen as the envoy, as he was impassioned with fervour for the far-ranging desires of the King. The hard-hearted warrior was nicknamed the 'mongoose', since even the poison of his bitterest enemy could not harm him. He shunned neither treachery nor lies, murder nor slander, if it served the purpose of making Kalinga more powerful. His greatest desire was to destroy the Maharajah of Aryavarta. Disguised as a student, he came to Rauma, pretending he wanted to visit the parishads of Aryavarta.

'I have heard that you have visited many holy places, high Mahamatra. Perhaps, you can give me advice for my long journey.'

Rauma looked up at the unflinching, unfeeling face of the warrior.

'I thought that Kalinga needed its young men for the army.'

'Kalinga needs the knowledge of Brahmanism, which Aryavarta abuses.'

'The Maharajah will keep no one away who wishes to practise earnestly his religion in his empire.'

'A Buddhist preaches his doctrine to the Arya and to the Mletcha. You know as well as I do that sacrificial priests are not tolerated in Pataliputra.'

‘Not in the palace.’

‘And that a wave of yellow robes has entered the Brahmin-court. Many of the priests who have been thrown out have found a safe haven in Kalinga; only there the gods are safe as yet from the mockery of the followers of the Shakyamuni. Are you a Buddhist?’

‘No.’

‘It is to your disadvantage.’

‘Disadvantage, do you say, Guptika?’

‘Yes. They told me ...’ Guptika noticed the guard. ‘Is that guard to remain present in our meeting?’

Rauma sent away the guard.

‘Refugees say that you wished for Ashoka’s daughter for marriage. To have her for yourself or to rise up?’

‘The Maharajah appointed me as a Mahamatra even without a marriage alliance.’

‘So, you wished to have the beautiful Princess for yourself!’

‘Princess Sanghamitra will marry my friend, Prince Agnibrahma.’

‘And you missed the one opportunity to get her!’

‘That opportunity does not exist.’

‘You can help the army of the Kalingas to overcome the heretic Maharajah and get her as a war-booty.’

‘You are speaking very boldly to a high officer of the Maharajah, young man.’

‘A Maharajah who sends you to dangerous, faraway borders to bear the brunt of battle. That means a troublesome suitor is out of the way! They know in Pataliputra how to keep you far away from the palace.’

Guptika noticed that his words made an impression and continued.

‘The victory of our army can only be to your advantage. He, who supports us, has a share in our power. What reasons do you have for supporting a sovereign who wants to destroy you? Remember his stance towards the Crown Prince or towards the Brahmins who have led the Mauryas to their greatest power with their dedicated offerings. You served him in many ways, and in return, he sends you to the far-off borders of his enemies! Join us in our fight to save Aryavarta from its downfall, which is inescapable, brought on by the insignificant, impotent and over-fragile doctrine of that foolish king’s son from Kapilavastu¹. Instead of steeling

himself for battle, he took cover in the cowardly slogan: 'Thou shalt not kill', which dooms the highest varna to dependency upon every brute or disgraceful one, on every marauding animal, even on ants and mosquitoes. What will stop the Mleccha in the future from destroying everything that is Aryan and then to feast on our graves? Can you not perceive the god-dishonouring madness of such a government? Whoever joins us, is the support of the gods, is a Kshatriya or Brahmin because he understands the higher goal of Brahmin duty and Brahmin dignity: to quell all that dares to resist our supremacy and he does not see war as a sin but as a higher expression of a higher spirit!'

'Sarata and Shakuni do not recoil from employing murder, betrayal, calumny and whatever means, however vile.'

'So, they must! What else can they do against the Mighty Mauryan Emperor! One who serves a higher goal has to embrace the means or else become an ascetic.'

'So, you allow any means as being permissible.'

'Yes.'

'What means do you, a small country, have against the Maharajah of a world empire? And why do you displace yourself from your country for years?'

'You ask more trust from me than I can give you. If you would but sympathise with the fight of Kalinga, I would return immediately, tomorrow even, to Tosali.'

'We will talk tomorrow.'

Rauma was surprised: Why had he been listening to the Kalingan? Was it his desire for Sanghi or his desire for adventure, or was it his awakening suspicion towards Ashoka? Why had he in the past chosen the side of Prince Kala! Had it not been his admiration for the work of the young Viceroy and the Maharajah? And about Sanghi ... Did he want to take a woman who did not want him? And had not the Maharajah given him the same chance to win the favour of the beautiful Princess as the Prince? Did not people say that Ashoka once refused a Princess of Mathura because she loved Prince Kala? Throne-thief? Brahmins killed, Virata, Sarvilaka ... Did he not reclaim the people from their clutches? Ashoka the Righteous; Sanghi, radiating youth and beauty. What has he done wrong in earlier incarnations that she so filled his life, yet was never within his reach! But

by betrayal of the holy Maharajah! ... Or, of himself? Did he want to have Sanghi only to possess her, or to have her in mutual love? His love had pained him more than he could bear. He had fled. But he never would be unworthy of her! No creeping in the mud of Kalinga. Never!

How could he serve the Maharajah best? Turn down Guptika proudly and watch the border-district even more strictly? Or, feign to be of help? Penetrate the secrets of the Kalingans? Maybe, suggest plans to them after consulting his master! Exterminate whoever wanted to destroy the great work of Piyadasi, the holy Maharajah? Work as a spy? Was Revata a spy? Or, a servant of humanity, as Ashoka used to call him? 'To unmask criminals is the bound duty of any officer.' ... Tomorrow!

'Do you guarantee me possession of Princess Sanghamitra and will I be a *rajuka*² of the next Maharajah?'

'Without a doubt.'

'You have to assure me!'

'The Raja will give you that assurance, as well as Sarata and the head of the Brahmin-court will bless you.'

'When are you thinking of starting the campaign? You know, Sanghamitra is engaged to Prince Agnibrahma. I could be too late.'

'Maybe, after the coming monsoon. Anyway, there are other ways to prevent the marriage.'

Rauma nodded. 'From your side?'

'No obstacles for whoever serves the higher goal!'

'Well, I choose—in all secrecy—your side. My name shall never be mentioned and only through you will I keep contact with your Raja. I will see that an easy entrance is opened in my district. What is your first goal?'

'Most likely, Suhma, Anga, Banga. Once we are there, we will be supported by Manipura, with whom we have a close friendship.'

'Ashoka's army is strong!'

'His Buddhism weakens his prowess. The strength of our army lies in our resoluteness for war. We want to restore the gods in Aryavarta!'

Rauma nodded. 'We will make the passage to Suhma as wide as we can. And what about the southern part of your domain? Gondavana and Dakshina recognise now the supreme rule of the Maharajah.'

'That supremacy is exactly what we want to wipe out in one decisive, yet risky, battle.'

‘Which one?’ Rauma asked, seemingly calm.

‘You will hear about it later.’

Rauma sent a complete message for the Maharajah. With one detail, though, he struggled: Agnibrahma. Had he not himself to take care of his own safety? Was he responsible for the deeds of Guptika? He served Ashoka, after all, not Agnibrahma.

The Maharajah was content about Rauma. Only, there was missing in his information the one detail that was part of the story of Ashoka’s spies: Agnibrahma. Ashoka thought of Rani Samgati’s words: ‘No ruler develops his powers to its fullest strength, who regards women as being the highest in a weak moment.’ Why did Rauma withhold information? The Maharajah took his precautions for the safety of the Prince. He sent Girika, Sura, and along with them Sapalin, a most competent commander of the horsemen, with some other officers to the border-district.

Rauma felt dissatisfied. His desire for Sanghi was overwhelming! But to betray Agnibrahma! He had grown attached to the Prince in the capital. He was true, earnest, benevolent, like the Buddha. What was it that struck him about the Maharajah? Was it not his righteousness, his compassion, and his truth that touched him? He was not bound to the letter nor chained to tradition. He was pure and spotless, shining over all his peoples, enlightening all, him, Rauma, too? Light, radiating from the great King, and shining to all creatures. And suddenly, the meaning of a Buddhist parable that Kullika once had related became clear to him, as the light of a torch kindled in the night. He, nor Agnibrahma, had understood it then.

‘In Indra’s paradise sprouts the *Kovidari-tree*³ and the *devas*⁴ watch its growth with sacred interest. When they see the first tender, yellowish leaves, they delight themselves in the thought of greenery that soon will fully develop. And when the tree is displaying all her beautiful foliage, they see how soft flower-buds appear and grow and develop themselves. In happy suspense they wait for the first half-open blossoms. And finally, when the tree comes into full flower, the devas celebrate, during four divine months, a feast of joy. And the flowering tree spreads an aura of light, radiating far and wide, and its fragrance is filling the vast ends of the skies and the devas’ cries of jubilation resound as far as the endless dwelling of Brahma.’

Had the ray of light been extinguished in him, and the fragrance blown away? Had the cries of jubilation grown silent?

Guptika brought him a message that three warriors, disguised as *Nigrantha*-priests⁵ were on their way to Agnibrahma's *mahamatriya*⁶. The Kalingan did not notice that the mahamatra was filled with despair when he was confronted with this reality. As soon as the Kalingan had left he consulted Girika, who worked for him as his stableman together with Sura, and who was always the invisible witness in important discussions. They decided to immediately send messengers to Ashoka, for safety's sake, and also since soon the rainy season would start. Sura left the same day with Rauma's message, travelling along the Kulya-river to reach Phalgu that way. From Bodh Gaya onwards he would be safe. The other courier took the longer but safer road over Tamralipti at the Western Ganga estuary.

Ashoka had ordered Agnibrahma and Sanghamitra not to leave the town for the time being. They were only allowed to accompany the Maharajah to the army camps. After the very depressing messages from Girika and Rauma, he thought it necessary to prepare his soldiers for what could await them in the likelihood of war with the Kalingans. There was only one stand to take: conquer or die. And conquest was only possible when one killed the enemy. Ashoka made them practise meticulously in chariot-handling, training of elephants, and chakra-throwing. Together with his commanders, he formed strong army-formations and combinations. Sanghi and Agnibrahma detested the war preparations and disliked the trips to the camps; they filled the Princess with great unease.

Sanghi joined the meeting of the court over Sudjata's case. She shuddered at the merciless sentences her Father gave to the employees of the slain Bali and especially his purohita who had misused his holy faith and misled Sudjata. He was sentenced to make a pilgrimage on foot to all the holy cities of the empire. If he should return after many years, the Maharajah would investigate if he had purified his soul of its dark stains. He would respect the priest only if he worked for the benefit of the gods and the people, according to the high principles of his faith. Should he neglect to do so then he would face the Maharajah on his path!

Sudjata was acquitted of the charges and rehabilitated. It is the duty of every human being to protect the dearest he possesses against injustice. Kesina was treated by the Maharajah in a most friendly way. Ashoka felt

Bali's crime personally as an injustice done by him to a subject. He wanted to make up for whatever wrong his officers had done to this sturdy Vaishya. While he was thinking, he saw how Sanghi, touched, went to Kesina and fondly embraced the Vaishyi, a charming girl of lovely appearance and openly-glancing mystic eyes, aware of the freedom and sacredness of her varna. Ashoka allowed her. Then he continued:

‘Sudjata, you are of a kind from which we make good purushas. Give me your son!’

‘gracious Maharajah, it pains me to have to disappoint your Majesty. My religion and my varna do not allow it. I believe that my only son has to be a farmer just like me. So wished my forefathers who from me and later from him, expect sacrifices even into the third generation. Only he who harbours hostility towards my deepest belief can stop the course of this good path. My family-lineage and my work have to continue from son to son. So, the gods will it.’

‘Then return to your family and your near ones, to your farm, Sudjata. No officer of the Maharajah will dare to disturb the loyal fulfilment of your duty again.’

Sudjata threw himself before the Maharajah. He then bowed deeply before Princess Sanghamitra.

‘Beautiful Princess, I will never forget what you did for me. I wish I could show you my gratitude; I will bring daily offerings for you.’

‘Well, Sudjata, I need support for my fiancé, Agnibrahma, whose life is in danger. In the Terai you fought wild elephants, lions and crocodiles. Would you mind protecting him as long as he is in danger?’

‘My soldiers protect Agnibrahma, my child.’

‘But not with the loyalty and love of Sudjata, my Father.’

‘If the holy Maharajah permits so.’

‘And your farm then, my Sudjata?’

‘My son can do the work as well as I, Sire.’

‘Well, if you want to return peace of mind to Sanghamitra!’

Where Agnibrahma went, he was followed by Sudjata, armed with an iron-wood club. He watched him in the mahamatriya. He followed the Prince when he rode out and when the Prince received a visitor, he rose from where he squatted and took up his club. Once, when three pilgrims wanted

to speak to the Prince about religious matters, he placed himself beside them, his club raised threateningly. Only when he had convinced himself that they truly had left did he squat down again.

‘You are suspicious, Sudjata.’

‘In the Terai, we watch every step of the animals of prey, High Prince. And people are even more dangerous. They have their mind.’

Sura reached, after a hard journey, the road to Bodh Gaya. There he took a new horse and in spite of his tiredness raced with speed towards Pataliputra, which he reached amidst streaming rain. His message was a release for the Maharajah. Rauma had found himself again. Immediately, Ashoka informed Sudjata and Agnibrahma. The Vaishya surmised that the three pilgrims could have been the Kalingans. They lightly smiled, but Ashoka had them investigated immediately at the foreigners department. They had left the city and departed for Kashi. During the long monsoon period, alertness and cautiousness eased, but not with Sudjata, who remained calmly alert as though in the jungle.

‘The danger is over, my Sudjata,’ laughed Sanghi. Together with Agnibrahma, she rode on the beautiful road to Bodh Gaya, as they did often while Ashoka visited the army camps. The autumn-sun revitalised nature to its full splendour.

A brigade of riders was sent ahead to ensure the safety of the road. Only Sudjata rode as ever a few steps ahead of the couple.

‘In Varsha, the monsoon time, a cobra loses his energy but not his instinct for killing that bursts out in Sharad again with renewed rage.’

‘Kama, the love god, and Shri, the flower-goddess of happiness and beauty, have with the last Maruts been descending again on India, my Sudjata.’

‘Animals of prey leave now their hiding corners, High Princess.’

‘How many predators do you still expect on this road, Sudjata,’ teased Agnibrahma.

‘Three, O, Prince. You do not know the patience of a predator. In the Terai we follow them until we find them.’

‘You have followed them for months already, Sudjata,’ laughed Sanghi.

‘Until I find them, High Princess. Therefore, I am here.’

Suddenly, the Vaishya reined in his horse. His trained eye had noticed at the side of the road three pilgrims who came forward when they realised they were seen. Armed with a short sword they all sprang towards Sudjata. Two clubs were flung through the air and struck two of the attackers, making them fall. The third priest neared Agnibrahma, raised his sword, but a fling of the club knocked out the weapon from his hands. Then Sudjata threw a third club at his head so that this enemy collapsed as well. Sudjata dismounted from his horse, examined the fallen men, and noticed that the one who was hit first was still alive. Sudjata tied him tight and threw him on his horse, in front of him. He rode to Agnibrahma and Sanghi, who had watched from a distance.

‘My work here is finished, Sir.’

When the Kalingan had recovered he was brought to court.

‘Since when do priests in Kalinga carry swords?’ The prisoner did not reply.

‘Who has sent you to Pataliputra? Was it Guptika or Shakuni?’

No answers came forth.

‘Torture!’ the Maharajah called. But neither fire nor glowing iron, neither racks nor nails were able to extract a word from the Kalingan. Because of the torment from the swords that penetrated deeper and deeper into his flesh he died at last, without a muscle moving in his face. Ashoka was deeply struck; a battle with warriors like him had to become bloody! He went to Asandhimitra and told her what had happened. ‘Nothing can save the fools from their delusion but their own fall. I do not know whether I have to feed my armies with a hatred that is as great, to withstand so much hate.’

‘No, my Raja. One does not cure hatred with hate. You do not want it yourself, my noble Maharajah, and that is why you came to me! You know that I think like you.’

‘No army is harder to conquer than one that is driven by religious hatred and ambitions.’

‘Except when an army has a rock-solid trust in its commander, and relies, like him, on humane rights, my Maharajah!’

‘You are my guiding star, Asandhi, who follows her unswerving course over the most dense and dark jungle of human passions. It helps to find the right direction when all other paths turn out to be false.’

‘No, my beloved King. Through the impenetrable chaos of your jungle, shimmers a mysterious light, awoken by the Atman in the lonely wayfarer. It penetrates his soul and ignites in it the will of his Will, the power of his Power, the love of his Love, that which is stronger than desire and stronger than hatred and revenge eternal: divine justice and compassion.’

When the second messenger of Rauma, who had taken the road over Tamralipta, also appeared in Pataliputra, Ashoka’s trust in the Purusha of Sodra was fully restored.

The rainy season was over and the monks, true to their mission and the will of the Maharajah, left the Ashokarama to teach Buddha’s doctrine in Magadha. Like the scent of the *Kovidari*-tree in Indra’s heaven, so the light of the Tathagata spread itself in the hearts of thousands who, confused by the events of the past years, soon perceived an assured direction. The holy Maharajah, Ashoka the Righteous, had himself turned to the simple teachings of the Buddha. Brahmins who were sincerely looking for truth, Kshatriyas who had endured with resentment the domination of the sacrificial priests, Vaishyas who with bitterness realised that they were the victims in costly rites at any family event, Shudras who had felt themselves shut out by the gods and all heavenly grace, Chandalas, the untouchables, who were victims of curses and deep scorn – for all of them it was as if the greyness of the cloudy skies had lifted, and the sun of Sharad pierced his rays in glittering lines through the clouds, filling Jambudvipa with its golden fortune, a joyousness flowing from Ashoka’s righteousness. Tishia was so deeply affected by the new faith, that he soon took both the initiations and became a monk in the convent of Sagata. Agnibrahma and Sanghi became upasaka and upasika; one followed the other. The monks became aware that the hearts of the people increasingly opened up to the new faith of the Maharajah. The begging bowls of the monks were filled in competition on their rounds along city and countryside. The men of the saffron robes appeared in villages and cities, in market-squares and parks, while they narrated the legends of the Realised Enlightened Buddha and the teachings of goodness, benevolence, solace and joy of life, for all, from Brahmin to Chandala. Ashoka could not find enough builders and carpenters for the construction of *viharas* and *sangharamas*. Master builders from Iran left for the rich country of Ashoka, to bring to fulfilment his ideas. Brick-making and stonecutters’ workshops asked for more

labourers. An unprecedented activity stirred up life in all the cities, but especially in Pataliputra, where the government buildings were rebuilt in stone and a new brick wall arose in the place of palisades.

The sacrificial priests waited, with vengeful hearts and jealous eyes, for the right occasion to regain their lost territory. Kalinga gave them new hope. They whispered that the construction of the many *chaityas*⁷, viharas, and of huge sangharamas, emptied the treasuries of the Maharajah. The army, which according to the new doctrine had become useless after all, and the heretical Buddhism, swallowed up all the revenues of India; the sramanas were insatiable in their desire for rich gifts. The Maharajah lavished on them his riches, which disappeared into the treasuries of the viharas. Pilgrims narrated, secretively, that the grain of the storehouses of the Maharajah in Prayaga and Mathura were sold to Kandravati, medicinal herbs of the large herbal-gardens to Iran, to refill the penurious treasuries of the Maharajah. And so, the drudges paid their heavy taxes and land-fees.

Ashoka knew that disappointed priests secretively did their utmost, to make his work questionable with Vaishyas, rich Brahmins, merchants and Kshatriyas, who regarded their possessions and self-indulgence higher than the 'delusion' of the young Maharajah. He also heard from informants that minister Aruna wanted to have these rumours discussed in the parishad. Since Ashoka never underestimated the danger awaiting him from the side of the sacrificial priests, he invited Sayana and several people from Pataliputra to be present at the meeting.

Aruna praised the sacred Maharajah in many beautiful words but expressed his fear that the high costs of the big structures, the generous gifts to all kinds of viharas and sangharamas, and the maintenance of the ever-growing number of sramanas, would turn out to be a danger for the House of the Mauryas. He set out, honestly, the rumours as they floated through the capital and the country. Buddhism asks great sacrifices especially from the Maharajah.

'High Parishad, maybe, the doctrine of any one of the hundred sects in my empire, if applied seriously, could bring happiness to my people. However, it seems to be a part of creation that all of us think differently. As the leaves of the banyan all have the same juices of the mother-tree, the same colour, the same striving towards Surya's light, as the water-drops all have the same freshness and buoyancy of their heavenly source and share alike in the quenching of thirst, so do all the souls of people share the *sara*,

the essence of their religions, that is to say, that which came forth from the world-soul, the Atman. I have been searching for that exhaustively, for years. And I found that this sara gets its clearest expression in one sect of Brahmanism, Buddhism. And Buddhism is also the only sect that will bring the happiness that it contains, to all people, to all that lives in creation, also to the other side of the Sarasvati, to the despised forest-peoples, the Shudras and the Chandalas, who are also unfoldings of the Atman, just like you and me. Since all my subjects are like my children, I have become upasaka of the Buddha. I want people to live in accordance with these teachings, the dharma: the good, the virtuous life, drawn out of the essence of all religions, as taught to all people by the sublime Shakya-son, the Tathagata, the Enlightened Buddha.

‘Or, do you think, high Parishad that I, now that I am seated on the ivory throne, will wait for things to come? Do you want me to give up the struggle of years, to fill like Dhana-Nanda⁸, stupa after stupa with valuables, collected from my peoples? And let my army weaken? Or, let myself be taken by surprise, by the conquest-hungry and treasure-greedy enemy? Or, do I receive the wealth of gold and precious stones, to pile them up in my treasuries to bequeath them to my heirs? Are my grain storehouses filled, to exchange their precious content for gold, silver, jewellery and money? Do I possess my treasures or do my treasures possess me?

‘Any possession limits the mind if it is not used for the liberation of the mind. Storehouses full of grain are of no use to the hungry, as little as for the one who had them filled. The stock of the storehouses in Prayaga and Mathura is brought to Kandravati, where the crop failed because of drought. It will feed the severely-stricken subjects until the next harvest. Does the grain grow for my storehouses or to feed man and animal? I send herbs and physicians to Iran because an envoy of Antiochos, Theos, informed me that in his territory raged persistent fevers. Are Iranians not living beings just like us, souls of the World-soul just like us? Do medicinal herbs grow for the storehouses of the Maharajah or for the cure of sick people? Does the Maharajah collect treasures to increase his own riches and splendour, just like a madman, or to perform the duty that is assigned to him because of his exalted position?

‘The highest Atman placed me on the throne of Aryavarta. All of you brought, at my consecration, the offering, and acknowledged with that the bonding to the highness of the Atman with which I know myself to be

united. I am the regulator, high Parishad. When my peoples would offer me their fees to have me be tied to the possession of it, then I would throw off all and wrap myself in the yellow robe of the Prince of Kapilavastu⁹.

‘Holy Sayana, I want to serve the doctrine not for the sake of the doctrine but for the will for the goodness that it kindles in the seeking soul.’

Sayana stood up and approached the throne. ‘Sire, you are Devanampiya, the beloved of the gods, you are Piyadasi, he who looks with friendliness on all beings; you are the sacred Maharajah.’

Then he fell on his knees and bowed his venerable head to the ground and all followed him.

‘My thoughts are kindred with and fruit of Sayana’s, Kullika’s and Asandhimitra’s thoughts, and with those of the many friends in my empire, who are all kindred with and fruit of the All-one. Is not the Dharma, the sacred law, the most beautiful fruit? So work all, diligently, for the Dharma for my peoples, the way I wish to work for it, hour by hour, day by day, year by year.’

In Kalinga, it was understood that Guptika’s plan had failed. And since Rauma’s help was very much appreciated they thought about a way to please the border-mahamatra. They viewed his love for Ashoka’s daughter as a desire for a higher position. So, Guptika promised him a post as a rajuka. There remained the issue of the wife. Shakuni thought that a girl was needed, more beautiful than Sanghamitra, cunning enough to ensnare the mahamatra, who held in his hands the road to Suhma, and inclined to serve the Kalingas by reporting his actions to the government. And so, Guptika led a Kshatriya-woman, who satisfied fully Shakuni’s conditions but who had once rejected his love, to the other side of the border. Satyavati was a proud woman, convinced of the just rights of the Kalingans but angered that foreigners were governing Kalinga and that she was ordained by her father to marry a Magadhan to spy on him. She had refused when it was explained to her, that she would serve the Raja and Kalinga against the great heretic of Pataliputra. But she obeyed, when her father ordered her to go to Sodra.

Rauma was informed by Girika, who sometimes as a pilgrim, sometimes as sarthavaha or caravan-servant, made the journeys to Tosali or to other bigger cities of Kalinga and knew how to penetrate almost everywhere as a well-disguised penitent. Rauma consulted Sapalin and they

decided that Rauma should not refuse. He would take the Kshatriya as his wife so as not to raise suspicion in Guptika. Satyavati was surprised to see a tall, slim young man with lively features who looked at her with pleasing interest. He knew that the women of Kalinga were seen to be passionate, and he struck her pleasantly by his quiet and assured approach.

A few months passed by. Once, on a night of a full moon, at the verandah of the house which, like a strong fortress, was built on a rock, Satyavati saw how Rauma was staring into the depths, overlooking the wide bluish tinged landscape. She walked up to him.

‘What makes the Mahamatra ponder so much?’

‘I am reflecting, Satyavati, how peaceful nature can be, how Chandra always fulfils its promise and caresses the earth with its soft glow and how mist covers the fields like the clothes do the priests, and how in the palaces the people are planning destruction and death.’

‘You dislike it, to betray your master, to serve our country.’

‘Well, it is what Shakuni, Sarata and many others from Magadha do.’

‘It is a sacred duty to fight for the gods.’

‘Is Shakuni fighting for the sacrificial fees of the priests, Sarata for the throne of Magadha, and I for a kingdom in the great empire? Or, do we serve the gods?’

‘Your talk is barren like that of the heretic sramanas, my Rauma. Is not the purpose of all to conquer the enemy of our gods?’ After a pause, Satyavati asked, ‘Was Sanghamitra beautiful?’

‘Almost as beautiful as you.’

‘Do you still love her?’

‘The wife of Agnibrahma! Does a Kshatriya love somebody else’s wife? You know that he became a Buddhist and that Mahindra, who should have to succeed the Maharajah, has been sent to Ujjain as Viceroy and is called back. Ashoka does think him unsuitable as Raja, so certainly too as Maharajah. He became a monk in the yellow robe. Sanghi ... mitra ... allowed her beautiful long tresses to be cut and put on the yellow robe. The joining of the Maharajah in the Sangha seems to work contagiously so that not only people in his surroundings, but also large groups of common people are taking refuge in the Buddha.’

‘Maybe, he forces them to do so.’

‘No, many are so fully convinced of the wisdom of the Maharajah that they believe in the rightness of his view. His conversion is for them enough proof that the Buddhists profess the right doctrine, and the sacrificial priests lost their trust.’

‘And you, Rauma?’

Rauma laughed. ‘Why ask me? I work for the gods of Aryavarta and for my kingdom!’

‘Only because Sanghamitra preferred somebody else? Under Ashoka, too, you would have become rajuka.’

Rauma was surprised at Satyavati’s astuteness but did not show it. She was not allowed to know anything of his thoughts.

‘And a Buddhist,’ he added casually.

‘Do you not feel for the yellow robe, now Sanghamitra, too ...’

‘No, because it condemns the ruler to powerlessness!’

‘Does battle appeals to you so much? And what if Ashoka wins? Do you think he will forgive you? Where do you want to hide yourself? And me?’

‘We do not intend to allow Ashoka to win.’

‘Are you a boaster like the lecherous Shakuni or the power-mad Sarata and the Kalingan army-commanders? The holy Muta was in Pataliputra and he told the Raja: ‘If you risk the war, then your country will be destroyed!’ Where do you want to hide you and me, my Rauma?’

In the clear moonlight Rauma could see that there was fear in her eyes. For what?

‘I do not want to fall into the hands of Ashoka’s warriors!’ she suddenly sobbed.

‘Return to Tosali if you are afraid, Satyavati.’

‘But then what about you, Rauma?’

‘Do you fear for me?’

‘Maybe.’ She cast her eyes down and knelt at his feet. ‘Who is that martial forest-demon who is constantly consulting you?’

‘The overseer of the roads, Sapalin, he is clever and never gets tired.’

‘Is he from Magadha?’

‘Yes.’

‘And to be trusted?’

‘Like myself.’

‘What are you doing to help the victory of the people of Kalinga?’

‘I pave the way to Suhma.’

‘Shush ... Be careful!’

‘I pave the way for the Kalingan armies,’ he went on, whispering. ‘Yonder at the border! We are making a large clearing in the jungle much wider and more open yet. From there, on the other side is a wide road that goes down to the slopes of the fields alongside the Mahanadi. Four roads on this side lead to Suhma, for each army division one.’

‘So, when Ashoka comes, he will have four roads, Kalinga one, and upwards!’

‘When Ashoka comes first he has only one road to Kalinga, we will have four to Suhma. And behind the wide pastures is the River Mahanadi.’ Satyavati did not notice his unrest. She took the hem of his cloth and kissed it respectfully.

‘I do not know, my Rauma, whether you are all not fighting for a lost cause. Before I was brought here, I went to see Muta, made offerings, and begged him to tell me what fate awaited me here. He kept silent, lost in his yoga. Could it be that Ashoka would attack Kalinga from here?’

‘Why here, behind the Mahanadi? The borders with Kalinga are long and open.’

‘Would you leave me if you have to flee before the Maharajah?’

‘No, you are my wife.’

‘Forced upon you, and you on me!’

‘Forced upon me, you say, Satyavati? I thought that they wanted to give me, with your beauty, a compensation for shattered hopes.’

‘I know. But with me, they had yet another goal ...’

‘Keep silent, Satyavati. You never know whether the drowsing jungle down there or the house here has not hidden wide-open ears!’ Rauma hissed.

‘Listen, my Rauma. I loathe the men of Magadha, the Raja who looks for his good fortune outside Kalinga, my father, who gave me away as a commodity of exchange, and degraded a Kshatriya to a spy. Do you trust me your secrets, Rauma? I have to tell them to Prince Sarata. Remember that, Rauma!’

‘So, you would rather serve Ashoka,’ he mocked.

‘No, not if he wishes to destroy the land of my forefathers, wipe out the confused Kalingans, and absorb our land within his huge, great empire. Rather than betraying my country, I would die, to become reborn in a new incarnation as a Vaishyi, whose man works the holy ground and sticks to the laws of our fathers. That is, if a spy can be reborn as a Vaishyi, Rauma. Or, is she going to become a hyena, to follow the tiger? I was proud to be a Kshatriya. For their goals, they did not spare me the deepest humiliation. For the glory of Kalinga and its gods! Bah! Muta says: total destruction! Soon, I will be left by everyone, and by you, too, Rauma.’

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Your love. I cannot live without your love!’

‘With what secrets do I have to pay for that?’

She flinched. ‘Secrets? No secrets! Shakuni sought my love and I refused, because I loathed him! Our line is a line of Kshatriyas! Then he forced—perhaps out of revenge—the Raja and my father to have me brought to you, to serve the Kalingas as a spy. Our country does not know sacred laws anymore, my Rauma. One only serves the gods. Please, keep your secrets, which I have to betray, with caution, my Rauma. Guptika may unveil them himself!’

Rauma picked her up, kept her in his arms, but she felt his distrust. How could it be otherwise, she thought bitterly. One who believes in Shakuni, the Brahmin, thinks that a woman is a sink of iniquity, never striving for anything beyond love. Like Kalinga, the war. Like Ashoka, the yellow robe.

Rauma brought her back to her quarters. Then he returned to the verandah. Was she playing a trick? He was certainly not insensitive to this beautiful woman with her sharp manas. Yet, he did not trust her! Why should not Shakuni have taught her to win his, Rauma’s, love, to fish out more plans and secrets out of him, to better fathom him by feigning admiration and pretending to curse the Kalingans and renounce Shakuni. Not again would he fall victim to love for a woman! The Master, that was his life! He did not want to meet death burdened with a curse.

The scent of the *Kovidari*-tree ...



THE BLACK NECESSITY

The Ashokarama sent out its monks through all Magadha to spread Buddha's teachings of love with its highest precept: 'Thou shalt not kill'. The Maharajah prepared his armies for war, eliminating every obstacle on the way to Kalinga so that his huge army could proceed with speed. Rauma, together with Sapalin, made the roads and fields ready for the Kalingans. Girika, who criss-crossed the enemy country in disguises of every kind, kept the Maharajah well-informed of Sarata's and Shakuni's activities.

So, another *Grishma*¹ passed by and the *Varshaa*² which followed, poured down its torrents over the hotly burning country. The monks reflected on the teachings, repeated with endless repetitions the sutras of the Tathagata, the legends of his life, his discourses, the jatakas, the tales of his reincarnations, or composed new tales full of imagination which would enthrall the people during their triumphal tours through the country. But in the palace the Maharajah consulted with his army commanders, with the chief controllers of the roads, the officers overseeing the food supply for the vast armies or he watched over the exercises on the huge encampment grounds, weighed up plans with Sela, gave orders to ensure a rapid and successful march, without allowing the talks with Sagata and the Sangha to lose impetus.

The Ganga and the Mahanadi had withdrawn themselves to their beds during *Sharath*³, Ashoka held his last meeting with his council of ministers, the parishad, before the embarkation of the expedition. Subhadrangi was announced. She had been witness to three Mauryas: the conqueror Chandragupta, the vanquisher of enemies, Bindusara, and her son. Maybe later on, Mahindra would have to rule, too ... Maurya!... Did tearing oneself free from the sacrificial priests mean surrender to the monks in the yellow robes? Rid oneself of the cobra and fall into the strangling clutches of the python? The Maharajah walked up to his mother and led her to a seat beside his. Without speaking a word she sat down. The Maharajah spoke very generally of his plans to deal with the Kalingas during the coming seasons of Sharath and Hemanth. Asandhimitra, who had seen the inner struggle Ashoka had to fight between his sacred inner endeavours and the necessity, still wanted to prevent the disaster. Khallataka wanted more compromise with the priests and the gods of Aryavarta and Sayana wanted to negotiate. Ashoka had Sura come in.

‘Sura, give the latest information of my messengers from Rauma’s district.’

‘In Kalinga rules the indomitable will for war. The army thinks itself to be strong. They do not fear the Maharajah; they say he hides his cowardice behind Buddha’s maxim, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ Everything is being readied for an inevitable shock attack on the east: Suhma, Anga and Banga. Thereafter to threaten Videha and Magadha with a now much larger army and with the help of Manipura in Further-India. The people either remain silent out of fear or are carried away by the flush of enthusiasm of the war-mongers. No one is allowed to express doubts about their success.’

‘Such is the situation. I have to protect Suhma, Anga and Banga.’

‘Send them your conditions, maybe ...’

‘I have sent them my conditions, High Agramahisi. Minister Udgata left yesterday for Tosali. Do not think they will accept them. I know they will refuse. That refusal will be for me the signal to start moving the army. Listen: ‘The Maharajah of Aryavarta demands the extradition of Shakuni, Prince Sarata, and the other commanders from Magadha; severe punishment of the captains of the Kalingan pirate-ships and of the gangs that violated the borders of Magadha; immediate reduction of the Kalingan army, to the capacity existing under Bindusarsa’s reign, handing over of all

surplus elephants; recognition of the anointed Maharajah of Aryavarta as the supreme ruler of the Kalingas. Only under these conditions will there remain peace between the two countries and shall the Maharajah recognise the King of Kalinga’.

If they do not submit, then I will force the Kalingans to comply.’

All kept silent. Subhadra stood up.

‘So, my son, the Maurya! It is the black necessity!’ She then left the meeting.

Two weeks later, Sura raced into Pataliputra with the message from Girika, who had joined the mission as a lipikara, that the King would send a reply to the demands. When minister Udgata remarked that this answer would be seen as a refusal, the Raja responded that Kalinga was a free country and the King would not tolerate interference in its affairs by the Maharajah. Udgata demanded to know if the Raja then expected the Maharajah to tolerate interference in his country. The Raja had nothing to do with that. Sura also informed Ashoka that Prince Sarata had ordered the army to move up to the Mahanadi.

Herewith, the war was unavoidable.

The army, blessed by Sivi with water from the holy Ganga, marched south over the Son bridge. Asandhimitra watched with the Maharajah the marching of army brigades, going endlessly for hours. Asandhimitra gazed in awe at the ominous military force. The Maharajah wanted the march to take place in strict order without delays and with the greatest possible speed.

‘Which of these courageous beings, marching along, is marked by Yama? How many widows and orphans? Which of them will return, maybe jubilant, not mourning the death of their comrades and glad with the death of the Kalingan, who most likely as little wanted this cursed war? Who really wants it! Who has a choice! Poor Ashoka, he who reveres Buddha’s ‘Thou shalt not kill’.

‘Were I not to kill then they will kill twenty-fold. The blood that tolerance demands, Asandhi!’

‘Who? They who want to, or those who have to?’

‘You are right, Asandhi. I do realise that war harms every side and goes against the essence of the Tathagata. But I am the Maharajah. I have to decide and it is my holy conviction that the spirit of Kalinga has to be

killed, that the people have to be defeated. Would the Buddha command now – Ashoka, ‘thou shalt not kill’, whatever the consequences? The doctrine, Asandhi, for sake of the doctrine? Do I obey the Buddha no longer when I follow here my conviction: to serve the doctrine for the good that it kindles in the seeking soul? I am the anointed Maharajah, Asandhi, the supreme justice, also the supreme duty. My work is consecrated by the anointment. My will, my profound conviction has to rule.’

‘Ashoka the Righteous. But do you know the consequence of your deeds? Sadly enough, the horrors of war you will know only after the war, when it is too late.’

‘Neither do you know the consequences, Asandhi, if I do not stand up to the Kalingans!’

‘I will keep silent, my Lord. When I see these hundreds of thousands of warriors passing by, I feel only one consolation: your righteousness and divine will; one single faith: your wisdom.’ She looked upon the army, marching continually along over the Son-bridge, and appearing to be unmoved.

In the middle of the road on which Ashoka’s armies marched sat an ascetic in deep meditation. When the workers were preparing the road, he had refused to leave his place which lay just along the route. Nobody dared to be disobedient to Ashoka’s orders; neither did they dare to disturb the ‘tree-rishi’. But Ashoka, seeing how the warriors and animals would place him in danger, requested him to look for a different place in the woods.

‘This is my sacred place, I wish to stay here!’

‘I am the Maharajah and master of the country.’

‘This place is owned by the gods!’

Ashoka ordered that the ascetic be taken away, to look for a quiet place in the forest, where he could be put. In rage, the hermit flared out:

‘Cursed art thou, Maharajah of a great empire, who does not respect the gods; they will punish you, the enemies will destroy your armies, and send you to hell!’

‘You are perpetrating a sin, Brahmin, because you are swearing in rage; you are offending the Buddha, who shuns soothsaying.’ To his men, Ashoka said: ‘Put the ascetic in an empty ox-cart, guard him, and take him along to the battle-field. The venerable ascetic will see who is winning the battle and whether his curse has value.’

Hardly anyone knew that the Maharajah has had two large troops of horse-soldiers of Bhils and Rajputans cross the Gondyana, south of the Mahanadi. He himself encamped in an open area of land, north of Rauma's four roads, to the south of which lay the field that Rauma and Sepalin had intended to be the battlefield and which along one sloping road, gave entrance to the meadows beside the Mahanadi. The Kalingans had thought of making use of it when they would march towards Suhma. Ashoka waited calmly. After some time, the news came in about the first movement of troops in north-Kalinga, then about the construction of a bridge of tree trunks over the Mahanadi, and at last, that the troops had crossed the bridge and had camped in the fields along the side of the river. Several brigades marched up the sloping road towards the intended battlefield.

'Do you not want to destroy the troops on this side of the river, Sire?'

'No, Radhagupta, let the whole army cross first, else my Bhils and Rajputans will get into trouble. Moreover, I want to finish off the whole army of Kalinga. I do not want a large part of the troops to flee into the jungle after the battle and to harass me later on. Either we will be destroyed, or they.'

The following morning, one could see from the busy movements of the opposing army that the Kalingans had been informed about Ashoka's arrival. That early in the morning, sacrificial rites were performed on the other side of the Mahanadi, the weapons were blessed and the drums and trumpets consecrated. Lengthy battle songs echoed through the air, and sacrifices were brought in order to strengthen the gods: soma, animals, and rice. Ashoka knew how important the Kalingans regarded these sacrifices.

Fear and confusion will penetrate their ranks.

Agni's flames will burn them,

Indra's thunder-club shall crush them,

Ghostly figures with bloody faces

And black teeth will frighten them.

Their warriors, on chariots and on horses

And elephants, their foot soldiers too,

Will fall in battle. Vultures and eagles,

Spreading their beautiful wings over the field,

Will feed themselves on their flesh.

*Their wives, waiting in their homes
Will, without adornment, with tangled hairs,
Beat themselves on their breasts, lament their sons,
Their husbands and their brothers ...'*

And after the incantation, followed the magic spell that was always chanted:

*'Downward blows the wind,
Downward shine Surya's rays
Downward seeps softly the milk ...
Downward sinks their soldiery!'
'Strengthen thou, Indra, Agni, godly warriors,
By the sacrifice we offer you.'*

At the very moment when the priests were about to offer the sacrifices to the fire, a troop of Bhils came charging along from a jungle road in a furious gallop, to take away from the Kalingans their trust in the gods. Sacrificial altars, fire, offerings, everything was broken down and destroyed, whereupon the riders sped away as swiftly as they had appeared. The warriors on the northern side of the river looked on in rage but it was too late to chase the Bhils: the war drums boomed like heavy drumming thunder, trumpets blared, conches screamed.

Masses of riders rode up the road to the battlefield and lined themselves up in long rows; then followed the elephants; they would provide cover for them at the rear. Behind them the foot soldiers arranged themselves and on the flanks were arrayed hundreds of war chariots.

Ashoka once more galloped through the camp, holding aloft his shining chakra, to inspire the warriors for the last time with courage and perseverance.

The answer was a thundering chorus: 'Shiva! Shiva! Shiva!'

In the very rear of the field the Vaishyas were at work, bringing in their crops. The Emperor thought immediately of espionage and reined his horse in.

'You are working on your land, yonder the war drums resound, Vaishya!'

‘Sire, the Brahmin performs offerings, the Kshatriya protects the country, the Vaishya works on the fields for food. So, what do I have to do with those fighters from yonder! May the gods be with our righteous Maharajah! It is not my affair!’ And the peasant went on with his work.

Along four roads an infinite number of the various squads of Ashoka’s army poured into the field in a short time – foot soldiers, elephants in the middle roads, riders and chariots on either sides. Each had its own road, moving as fast and as sure, as if it was a game on the exercise fields at Pataliputra. The reserve troops remained at the entry roads and on the field behind, to move up if an order was issued. The Maharajah had taken the highest point of the battlefield, astride on his horse, surrounded by his massive guard elephants and a hundred fast riders for the carrying of messages. Further on, he had made room for the ascetic. Not a word had been exchanged between them. The first signal was given from the other side and Ashoka saw how a tremendous force of riders broke free from the lines of the enemy camp and in a wild rush came up in his direction. It was Prince Sarata, who hoped in a daring surprise attack on the Maharajah, to bring about a decisive move. The wild roaring of the warriors, filled with hate and revenge, reached the Maharajah, who gave his orders, unperturbed.

He arranged a huge array of war elephants to oppose the riders and had strong units of chariots placed on the flanks, so that the enemy was attacked from three sides. The collision was horrendous. Ashoka’s elephants, used to the loud tumult, went on undisturbed and attempted to force the enemy to retreat but the war chariots forced them into a fight. Prince Sarata saw the danger and sent ever more riders into the field until the losses forced him to call in the elephants as well. Ashoka sent some war machines in his direction that made such a deafening noise that Sarata’s elephants, which were poorly trained and unused to noise, became deranged, so that their mahouts had their hands full. Then the Emperor ordered the infantry to move forward in two phalanxes, which worked themselves in between the fighting groups and brought with their swords heavy losses to the enemy.

Prince Sarata discovered once more an opening where he wanted to squeeze himself through with a small group of riders, in order to reach the Maharajah. Sela saw the intention and sent upon them a body of chariots, each with four horses.

‘Kill them! First, the rider in front!’ Spears and arrows pierced the Prince who was flung down from his horse; a fighter in one of the chariots

gave him the final blow with his long broadsword. The fight had now spread out from the centre onto the entire area of the field. Nowhere did the Kalingans give way although the number that fell was enormous. In spite of the death of their commander-in-chief their attacks remained fierce and fearless.

Where the Maharajah sensed that his troops had weakened, he had new reserves moved up, who came storming out of the four roads in strict discipline, executing every order, correctly and rapidly, while the next ones moved up again. For the Kalingans it proved to be increasingly difficult to bring up the necessary brigades over the one road to the field. In the engagement of the various groups of battling soldiers, the Maharajah continuously brought well-trained elephant-units into action but when the enemy too brought in its war elephants, he sent in the infernal machines of war, and archers who beset the mahouts of the enemy. Only then Ashoka's elephants followed along with the war chariots, which transported mahouts, who could catch the animals that were out of control and roaming around. Many of them were captured and led behind the lines. Messengers continuously rode up and down between the Maharajah and the fighting forces to report about the state of affairs and Ashoka directed his fresh troops accordingly, wherever his warriors were being outnumbered or a decision could not yet be made. For the Kalingans the most dangerous warriors were Ashoka's archers and chakra throwers, warriors who had been practising for years. They placed their tremendous bows upright with one end to the ground, braced by one foot, spanned the string and drew on the heavy iron-tipped arrows that no one could avert. No shield could give protection, no rings of armour or breast-plates were able to deflect their power. The battle became more bloody; hate provoked hate, revenge called for revenge. Neither man nor animal was spared any longer because no one gave in. The savage offensive power of the Kalingans, their disregard for death, their rage, gave the fighters of Ashoka plenty of work, but provoked in them too the animal passions, madness broke loose. And from his elevated point of view the Maharajah followed hour after hour the battle, quietly, with calm thoughts, single-pointedly aiming at one goal: the destruction of the Kalingans. Where warriors were needed he did not conserve them, where the legion was too small and he expected a heavy battle, he sent his inexhaustible reserve-troops, sometimes as a phalanx, then as a squad or *garudas*⁴, as the situation called for. He calmly

responded to each message of danger for his warriors by sending in fresh forces which were always ready to move up at the entrance of each of the four roads.

‘Sela’s chariots are in danger, Sire. They are fighting an overwhelming number of Kalingans. The enemy closed off everything with elephants in impenetrable ranks.’

‘Radhagupta, you take my place. You, Dala! Five units of elephants! You, five squads of chariots! You, three phalanxes of sword-fighters! You, ten bands of foot soldiers and one of sinew-cutters! You, five units of riders! These will go in front!’

The messengers sped away. Ashoka’s elephant signal was sounded and fifty of the heaviest animals arranged themselves in perfect ranks, heavily protected with iron, the tusks ringed with dangerous barbs, each manned with four armoured archers and chakra-throwers and two mahouts. A new signal was given; the horses shot forward, the machinery followed, then the elephants, then the wild rattling chariot group and lastly the infantry soldiers. Swift and disciplined, the armed force approached the middle of the field, where Sela and his men fought a battle of despair. The din was deafening, screaming and howling fighters, trumpeting elephants, blaring war trumpets and conches, horns, beating drums, rattling chariots with their four horses, all in raging speed throwing themselves into the battle, screaming charioteers, furiously beleaguering swordsmen, cursing, and the moaning wounded ... one goal: to destroy the enemy, who they did not know.

Arrows, spears, chakras, flew through the air from all sides; swords swung over the warriors, war-axes, knives, spears. Nothing held back. And the swelling, wild victory-cry of the Kalingans drowned out everything. Until Ashoka’s riders approached and unnerved the elephants in the arena, with a concerted attack-and-retreat-strategy. The Emperor directed his elephants with short signals into the ranks of the enemy, broke through the ring, and with new signals, had the animals move up to the front on two sides, and thus made clear a wide passage, through which the chariots, riders and phalanxes, could sweep in. Within a short time the direction of the battle was altered and all of the enemy were brutally killed. Thunderous cries resounded: ‘Shiva! Shiva!’ Sela was saved. Then, the elephants were assailed from all sides. The war-machinery brought many animals, imported from Yakshapura, and hitherto not used to the din of war, to a state of wild

panic. They did not heed their mahouts anymore and ran berserk in all directions. Ashoka's troops shot and threw off first the elephant riders; the desperate animals, without mahouts, became a danger for friend and foe. The sinew-cutters put many animals out of the fight and the felled warriors were killed.

When necessary, Radhagupta, now in Ashoka's stead, brought in new brigades into the fray in other parts of the field, where the battle raged with the same barbarity, until Ashoka's troops were in charge everywhere. Now, the Maharajah sent a strong troop of elephants to the only road of the Kalingans and had it barricaded. Those of the enemies who were still alive on the battlefield screamed out their hatred for Ashoka's warriors, but nothing could save them anymore: they were either killed or imprisoned. The battle continued on the sloping road. Elephants ran forward, war chariots followed and dragged along everything in their downward dash, killing, trampling or shattering all under their wheels. Continuously, Radhagupta's fresh troops thundered down the road. Ferocious fighting broke out on the fields along the Mahanadi. The Kalingans were in the grip of panic, they knew their case was lost and nothing could be saved anymore. Yet, many of them fought until death since that had been drummed into their minds, they did not expect mercy: they would not have shown it themselves. A few groups tried to save their lives by crossing the bridge of tree trunks. But on the other side, they were attacked by the desert-riders, Bhils or Rajputans on their swift horses, and killed, or driven back over the bridge where Ashoka's troops awaited them. He, who abhorred one fate as much as the other, threw himself in the stream of the Mahanadi, to drown himself.

More than a hundred thousand of the young and strong enemy littered the battlefields, more than a hundred and fifty thousand awaited their fate as prisoners, and hundreds of thousands in the country missed their breadwinners and protectors. In between the dead bodies, lay the cadavers of an incalculable number of animals, massive bodies of elephants, horses, stretched out, dead, or writhing in the final throes of death.



THE QUIET

It was as though the Maharajah only now woke up from the stupor of the war. The senseless carnage was still raging, wherever there were fanatical Kalingans who refused to surrender, but the Emperor wished for a halt. The Kalingans who kept on fighting were overpowered by surprise, either captured, or killed. The thunder of the battle abated, but the moaning and screaming of the wounded, which had earlier been drowned out by the noise of battle, now rose up from all over the battlefield. Elephants that had run amok rushed around, inflamed with rage, trumpeting, trampling viciously both friend and foe, grabbing and tossing anew. Ashoka was horrified to behold the havoc they still caused.

‘Catch the animals, or kill them, and clear a way through the battlefields!’ In spite of their fatigue, the warriors dragged everything to the side.

‘Carry the wounded on chariots to our tents. Tend to them on the fields, friend and foe!’ At last, he directed his elephants that had survived back to the camp. Too aghast for words he went his way, pursued by the moaning, screaming, groaning, cursing or the deliriousness of the wounded from all sides. ‘Water!’ ‘Kill me, kill me!’ ‘Punish the heretic!’

The Maharajah halted, looking at the wretched figures.

‘Sire, the head of the King.’ Ashoka looked at the fine silk scarf adorned with gemstones and pearls that still covered the smirking, severed head.

‘Put it with his body.’ He looked around with infinitely sad glances. Was hell like this? No, surely not this bad! Chopped-off heads, legs, arms, some glittering with rings of gold and silver and precious stones. In between were the killed animals, broken chariots, flags, smeared with blood, countless arrows, swords, axes smashed in half or still holstered around the shoulders of the dead bodies, tridents, clubs with iron heads, spears still driven into pain-contracted bodies. Corpses everywhere. Ye gods! Was mankind insane? Was he insane? What was it all these fools yearned for when they were still alive? And now, gone! That smell of blood and mud ... A hell without fire or was he the fire? Or, the extinguisher? Doomsday of the world, without a judge. Or, was he the wretched judge? Or, the executioner? Asandhi, Asandhi!

Surya sank behind the jungle turning away from the battle-scene. A blazing sunset that seemed to mirror the bloody field, quivered in the sky. In the camp, Ashoka had all those who had not taken part in the battle, fall in, and ordered them to light torches, to fill the water jars, to clear paths in the battlefields, and search everywhere for the wounded. Physicians and veterinarians of the army were to decide who could be transported, who anaesthetised, who to release.

‘The elephants have fallen prey to great distress, O, Maharajah, and the mahouts are not in control of them. The animals stamp, trumpet, flail with their trunks and nobody dares to approach them. The horses, too, are hardly able to calm down.’

Ashoka made his way to the elephant camp and whistled. It was as if a shock of joy coursed through the big animals and some of them made their way hastily towards their master. Ashoka caressed them, spoke friendly words to them. And it was as if a feeling of security returned to the distressed animals.

‘So, children, calmly now, to your places. Get some musicians, Jana, play soft music, veena, soft flute, ravanastha.’

Melancholic tunes from the flute sounded sweetly and softly through the camp, accompanied by the silken tones of the veena. Eventually, the animals calmed down and became quiet.

For a long time the Maharajah led his horse over the battlefield behind the torches. His sharp ear recognised every sound. He searched like the others. It was a gruesome trek. Everywhere men were seen roaming around, chariots carrying their load to the tents, to be saved or released. At last came the great silence. And beneath the shining stars, darkness settled below, pitch darkness. They returned to the camp, the Maharajah, too. But one more time he turned towards the battlefield.

‘Am I indeed Shiva, Lord of death?’ Suddenly he saw the ascetic, still sitting where he had ordered him to be put down in the morning. He walked up to him.

‘Well, venerable penitent?’

The penitent stood up, fell on his knees and bowed his head to the ground.

‘Sire, you are a great army commander! The gods have blessed you!’

‘Blessed, you say, penitent? Can this be a blessing? Cursed is the war, you venerable fool!’

Ashoka ordered rest to be taken and withdrew to his tent. All seemed to sleep except the physicians and attendants in the tents of the wounded, and the guards. O, that groaning from the distance.

In the middle of the night Ashoka woke up from his sleep by a dream: He was roaming around on the battlefield in twilight, alone. No, Asandhi walked behind him, as she wanted to tie a delicate-blue scarf around his head but just before his eyes the delicate material tore asunder all the time. The head of the King of the Kalingas was lying in the mud uttering a long-drawn-out crying, whining sound: ‘Give me my body, I want to speak!’ A slave approached him: ‘Nowhere to be found, O, Raja!’

‘Then give me my legs!’ A slave brought the two legs, clad with beautiful rings and gemstones and placed them under his head. The Raja wailed louder, whimpering, as if it came from afar. ‘Dance!’ And the legs moved and danced, and the gemstones and rings rattled, and the grinning head laughed. Four beautiful slaves came floating near with *chamaras*¹ and wanted to fan him. But the Raja was too small and suddenly, the legs grew tall, pale, and the rings grew bigger and sounded like heavy gongs. ‘Dance!’ A high-pitched shrill cry going on for a long time, and everywhere the defeated and the wounded raised themselves up. Endless rows of them, and all danced, and the Raja cried with a hoarse, rasping sound. Horses,

elephants, donkeys, draught-oxen, floundered up from the red mud and they danced. 'The dance of Shiva!' the Raja screamed, the bedlam grew, chopped-off arms and legs rose up, fought in chaos. But the Kshatriyas gave way to them nervously, because they were of a lower varna. They were scolded. There was a hoarse barking. The Raja approached Ashoka, a head with long pale legs, white with spots. 'Leper!' bellowed the crowd with one voice, and a howling and barking cry from the jungle answered: 'Leper!' Then, Ashoka took up his chakra and threw. There was blood. The legs fell, full length, rattling to the ground, the head in the mud, and all dancers, men and animals, fell down too, stiff, upon and through each other. Silence. Only the Raja wept in the dark night ...uhuhuhuhu ... hoarsely, almost inaudibly. Then there neared, twenty-four. Ashoka wanted to grab his chakras but they were nowhere around him. Terrified, he fled into the dark, pursued by the whining of the Raja and the dead ones.

He awoke. But the strange sound went on in the rustling of the silent night, a long stretched-out whining mixed with hoarse barking from afar. He shuddered. Was this a dream, or was it real? Had a ghostly enemy come up to him? He hastily got up and stepped outside the tent.

'What is this?'

'Jackals and hyenas, O, Maharajah, lured by the smell of the war that the north-east monsoon is driving to the jungle.'

'Where?'

'The animals are drawn from far and near to so much bait, Sire. They are anxiously howling at the edge of the woods and bark and gather courage.'

Ashoka went silently inside, lay down, staring into the distance with wide-open eyes into the future. What task awaited him yet? Again a brother, the sixth, Ashoka the Cruel ... Ashoka of the hell! He was surrounded by border-peoples as fierce as the Kalingans. Was he to cover for ever such battlefields with dead men and animals like this? To kill a hundred thousand, like here? At the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satyaputras, the Keralaputras, the Yavanas, the Kambojas, the Nabhakas, the Bhoyas, the Pitinikas, the Andhras, the Pulindas? Where is the end, Asandhi, where?

Thankfully, the howling died down. Yet, sleep did not return. And when the Asvins shot their first red rays through the morning mist, and *Ushas* opened up the heavenly gate for Surya, he walked out of his tent and

wandered, lost in thought, to the battlefield. The horror was more gruesome than the most gruesome images fancied in the night: everywhere dark brown monsters, nervously dragging along, with insatiable greed, the abundant booty towards the protective woods. Yellow animals, their bushy beard-hairs and tuft-like tails dripping with blood, above the fields black clouds of vultures, eagles, ravens, alighting and strutting with a fierce stretching of muscles. Ashoka looked over the dreadful scene. He wanted to see it so that it should be indelibly imprinted in his mind forever. 'Henchmen of the Lord of death ... Where do I ... find back the Tathagata! ... Asandhi!'

When the day became hotter, a smoke of pestilence spread around, that choked everyone's breath.

'Sela, you set off with a part of the army to Kalinga. Bring everything under my control. I wish no harm to be done to these who will surrender voluntarily. Whoever resists, you will bring to reason, if possible with a soft hand. No looting, no killing. We have killed enough, my Sela. I do not want revenge, hatred, no more! The remaining part of the army, under Sagka, returns with the prisoners, as fast as possible, to Pataliputra.'

Ashoka joined Sela on the road to Tosali. Vaishyas and Shudras continued to work on their fields and did not pay any attention to Ashoka's army or to the horrors of the battlefield. The inhabitants of the villages and the town at first fled in mortal fear into their houses before the victorious army, but when they saw that no harm was meant to anyone, they soon returned timorously, and watched the armies passing by, many of them sobbing. In all homes there was mourning, and Tosali made a devastating impression.

'Show me the palace of the Raja!'

'The Raja fell in battle, Sire.'

'Where resides the city-governor?'

'Fell in battle, Sire.'

'Who is governing this city?'

'I do not know, Sire; I think, no one. All citizens joined the army.'

At last, a procession of women, grey-beards and children, came to meet them with paltry presents to secure favour from the victors.

‘We have no more than this, Sire! Be merciful to us! All families mourn the death of men and brothers. The Raja had taken away all our treasures for the war.’

Ashoka had ordered Rauma to guard the road to Suhma to prevent the Kalingans from getting there. Rauma waited in great suspense, but no enemy appeared.

‘Do you expect a victory of the Kalingans, my Rauma?’

‘No.’

‘So, you have betrayed them.’

‘You call it betrayal! I would call it betrayal if I had supported them, Satyavati. My master is the holy Maharajah of Aryavarta. He is the one I honour because he is righteous, never looking for his own happiness but that of his people.’

‘I suspected it.’

‘And you informed on me to Guptika?’

‘Informed on you! I hate Guptika more than you do! You are their enemy I was their victim, because you remained distrusting of me.’

‘How could I trust you, sent by Guptika, well-familiar with Shakuni, daughter of an influential Kshatriya in Kalinga, who came here to spy on and betray me!’

‘But they do not know how much I hate them and how much I love you!’

‘Who proved or can prove that to me ... Satyavati. Never will I know whether you are true! I was inclined to believe you. But my position and my safety compel me to mistrust them and, sadly enough, you too. Nothing will be able to allay that suspicion. I love you and yet my love would turn to hate if I discovered ...’

‘Discovered?’

‘That you wanted to misuse me to serve Kalinga, Sarata and Shakuni!’

‘For Shakuni and Sarata I would sacrifice nothing. On the contrary, for Kalinga, all, except you.’

‘I would love to believe you, my beautiful Satyavati.’

‘But distrust is rearing its head like a cobra in the grass, even when a lamb approaches. What proof do you want of my love, my Rauma? My death?’

She took a dagger that was lying nearby.

‘No!’ He ran up to her, grabbed her hand strongly and took the dagger away.

Satyavati smiled at him with an infinitely tender glance. She understood how difficult a struggle he had to fight against his suspicions. What came from the Kalingas was not to be trusted; their very endeavour for war was founded on betrayal and lies and bold denial of all that had once upon a time been sacred. How then could Rauma trust her? If she was like those who had brought her here, he was entitled to distrust her! How would she ever be able to convince him! Even when he trusted her love, he knew with what purpose she had come. However sure he might be of her feelings to him, nothing could take away the doubt about her sincerity, a woman, a barrel-full of flaw, who does everything for the sake of love and if need be, even feigning love. Why should she not be capable of loving Shakuni and feigning love for Rauma, to betray him! Her fate!

In the night, Guptika and Shakuni, together with five armed soldiers approached the gate. Guptika was a regular visitor of the fortress and usually came during the night. So, they were led in and asked to speak to the wife of the high Mahamatra.

Satyavati was startled. She left the room and met the gatekeeper.

‘Guptika wishes to speak to you, high Rajuki.’

‘Today, we have lost the battle against the Maharajah! Our army is destroyed. Rauma has betrayed us, laid a trap for us, for the great heretic; he arranged the battlefield in such a way that we had to lose! His groom was one of the most dreaded spies of Ashoka ...’

‘And Satyavati may not be totally innocent. Who ever heard that she, with her sharp *manas*, had ever let herself be misled by a man?’ Shakuni snapped at her.

‘At least, not by a priest filled with hatred and revenge. I served Kalinga! You too?’

‘Lead us to your spouse and show us proof that you are still loyal to the Kalingas!’

‘It would not help you,’ she whispered. ‘Heavy armed sentries are guarding his room ... You are too weak!’

‘We come as friends!’

‘Even friends are distrusted here now! Keep quiet! I will lead you along a secret way to the women’s quarters, and from there you can reach him unnoticed.’ The proof, the proof! ‘Follow me, very quietly. Maybe, the entry gate is guarded. I will open it and then you move ahead quickly when I signal you but keep silent! And walk fast and softly, else they might see you. Right there! Two soldiers are enough.’

‘You are going in front of us!’

‘Yes!’

She led the four men silently to a dark passage, opened a heavy door and whispered: ‘Now, quick!’

She shot forward in the dark. Guptika and Shakuni tried to keep pace. The priest uttered a scream of fear. Then everything was quiet.

Rauma heard the screech and rushed out of the room.

‘Satyavati! Satyavati!’

The gatekeeper approached. ‘Sir, Guptika was here with someone they called Shakuni and five soldiers. Three of them are still waiting in the hall. The others followed the Rani through the corridor that leads to the gate of death.’

Rauma clapped his hands. From all sides, guards and servants came up to him.

‘Torches!’ They entered the corridor. The two soldiers stood at the end, trembling. They indicated the door which had been opened wide. Behind that, open space. It was the gate through which those condemned to death were forced to jump into the abyss.

‘Come along!’ cried Rauma. ‘Torches!’ All rushed out of the main gate, down the fortress road to the open field and to the foot of the rock. Guptika and Shakuni were dead, crushed. Satyavati, severely wounded, was still alive; because of her voluminous clothing she had most likely taken the fall lightly. Rauma lifted her up very carefully.

‘Satyavati!’ She smiled, and lost consciousness. With great care he carried her up to the fort. The purohita examined her and shook his head. After a long time, she regained consciousness. Rauma caressed her tenderly.

‘Do you know it now, my beloved man?’

Rauma was startled. ‘Have you ...?’

Satyavati’s speech was laboured. ‘They wanted to kill you. Betrayal. Kalinga lost the battle. I had to go on ahead and led them through the gate

of death.'

Rauma could barely hear her anymore. Moved, he took her very carefully in his arms and stayed with her all the time, supporting, consoling. For two days she lived, a time of deep pain and inexpressible happiness for both.

'Reborn as Vaishya and Vaishyi, you and I, my Rauma. No war, no hate, no spying. Only our love in peace and happiness, good to all that lives, like Ashoka and the Buddha.'

Ashoka returned on horseback as fast as possible to Pataliputra, resting little, sleeping even less.

'The gracious Maharajah is sick. Fortunately, we are nearing the capital.'

'No, I am not sick, Radhagupta. Are you pleased, proud with our victory, my Radhagupta?'

'We have attained our goal, Sire.'

'At what price! Hatred unleashed the war. It was pride, lust for power, greed. But the war unleashed the hatred, plumbed the depths of the most awesome lust, buried deep, deep down in the human heart, almost forgotten. And now brought out into daylight, raging and destructive, my Radhagupta. How do we bury this monster anew, deeper yet, in such a way that it cannot come into daylight anymore! It follows me, snatches away my sleep, saps the will that seeks out salvation from this greatest of sins. Now I know that I have failed, although I conquered. Now I know, Radhagupta, that I, although my troops proved by far to be the strongest, suffered the greatest defeat. This victory is the most profound defeat, the defeat of my will, which was looking for happiness for all.'

'Sire, it was needed!'

'Is this needed? It cannot be worth this price! ... Not worthy Radhagupta. I have to gather, high minister, so much wisdom that this is never needed again. This hellish mocking of the deeds of people, this black shadow of the blackest lust and hatred, this war ... madness.'

The Maharajah forestalled any festivity or triumphant entry. All joy of victory had clouded inside him. Asandhi was a wise woman, Sayana a sage. He, the sacred Maharajah, had believed he had a good understanding of his task. And all his work had led, like others before him, to war. Murder,

hatred, revenge. First, he went to see Asandhimitra. She received him with wide, questioning eyes.

‘You have won the war, my Maharajah?’

‘No. I have conquered the war, Asandhi. This war was the last one I will ever undertake. War is the greatest madness with which the mind of a Maharajah can get entangled. A hundred thousand deaths, a hundred and fifty thousand prisoners are being transported to Pataliputra. The land is impoverished, inhabited by widows, orphans and greybeards. For what purpose, that war? For the welfare of the people of Kalinga? For the gods, who, now too, let them wait for them? For the power, Asandhi! The power that does not aim at the well-being of living beings! War is exiled from my country, because it destroys armies, makes the people jackals and hyenas that devour each others flesh and blood. Jackals, hyenas, vultures, eagles, raven, they are the victors, Asandhi! They celebrate the bloody feat of victory! How will I carry the burden of this war, Asandhi?’

‘It was not you who wanted this war, my Maharajah!’

‘I did not prevent it. In my pride and sense of power!’

‘The refugees of Magadha, the followers of Prince Sumana, were the ones who plunged towards the war, and the power hungry King of Kalinga.’

‘But it was the people of Kalinga who fought the war. How do I know, if my peoples do not want a war one day! He, who smothers animals for sacrifices, does not spare the human being. He, who kills animals for sake of pleasure, will not spare the human being! He, who watches with joy and delight the fighting of animals, watches with joy and delight the fighting of people. He, who calls human beings ‘animals in human guise’, does not shrink from killing people. It is the mind, the inner attitude of the people that is false, my Asandhi. I, who desired so much the happiness of my people ... needed your delicate-blue scarf, in order not to kill out of savagery. False, false, my Asandhi! False, false ... blood-thirsty ... hyenas ...’

Asandhi knelt before him and kissed the hem of his cloth.

‘Stop it, don’t kiss my cloth, Asandhi. It is dripping with the blood of a hundred thousand Kalingans and of my soldiers and my animals!’

‘I kiss the cloth of my beloved who recognised that this world was a false one, that he needed the delicate-blue scarf of Shiva. War, my Lord, is like a tiger that takes a human being as its spoil, and now feels the lust

burning inside, to devour ever more human beings as its prey. But my Maharajah recognises that the attitude is false. Now, the true power will find its way, my beloved. May Brahma bless you, my poor Maharajah!’

‘Night and day the terrors of the war haunt me, which I myself unleashed. In my dreams and in my thoughts they never leave me. The most horrible bloodbaths, the most gruesome scenes, I go through them night after night as my burden of guilt, Asandhi. Warriors scream their hatred out to me, families their disaster. The crying of the jackals, the howling of the hyenas, the cawing of the raven, it sounds as a hellish cry of victory through my nights. My mind is unable to grasp what was, to organise what has to be done. No rest, Asandhi!’

‘Kalinga drove you to a war that your ennobled soul could not bear anymore. That is the dreadful conflict within you that has not yet balanced out. Rest here, on this couch. I will stay awake with you, my beloved Raja.’

‘The Arthashastra forbids ...’

‘I will warn Satyavat that you will need his loyal protection.’ Asandhimitra had Satyavat come in, told briefly how the Maharajah suffered and that she wanted to return him his quiet. Satyavat took care of the guarding of his master. Then, the Maharani seated herself beside her spouse, took his hand, caressed it softly, her hands stroked tenderly over his face that was flushed and clammy.

Ashoka fell asleep, to wake up startled a moment later.

‘Blood ... corpses ... a world full of corpses, Asandhi. The greatest victory is not the one with weapons but with the Dharma ...’

The Rani softly stroked his forehead and temples and he fell asleep again. Now too, the sleep only held for a short moment, wildly he got up.

‘Blood all the time. That grinning head! The war drum, Asandhi!’

A moment later, he flew up from the couch, aghast.

‘Calm, my Piyadasi. I am here and outside Satyavat keeps watch.’

‘My elephants and horses ... That soft glance of the dying Jampa! ... the despair of the poor animals ... who gave me their full trust ... in the human-hell ... No living being shall be killed again or harmed ... *ahimsa* ...’

Again, he fell asleep and after many hours woke up with a smile. Asandhimitra was still sitting at his couch, Satyavat guarded his door ...

‘Are you still here, Asandhi? ... I dreamt that the Buddha walked through Magadha ... It was in the full-blown paddy fields around Kashi ... Behind him many people were walking, of many tribes and varnas. I joined them ... He spoke: ‘The doctrine that I gave you, the teachings I taught you, is your teacher, after my death.’ I approached the Buddha, could not see him but asked him: ‘Who am I, holy Buddha. I have lost myself.’ He did not answer, but all seemed to wait for it. ‘Sir, tell me that there is blood sticking to me, that I am a murderer.’

Then I heard a voice, tender and melodious as a veena: ‘No one is what he is, my Piyadasi. Everyone is what he is going to be.’

‘What is it I am going to be, Sir?’

‘All being is fleeting. You are going to be what you want to. Do you want to enter Nirvana?’

‘No, it is not yet my time ... not now.’

‘You do not want to because you are Maharajah, Piyadasi. A Maharajah kills animals in the hunt, has men and animals killed in war, giving food to the jackals and hyenas, lets criminals be killed by his executioner, has animals killed for his kitchen ... no, no. A Maharajah cannot enter Nirvana.’ ...

Many looked at me with pitiful glances.

‘But I am Shiva, Lord of Death.’ When the disciples and the followers heard that they all fell on their knees and bowed because they feared me. I saw that I was wearing a necklace of skulls, amongst them that of the Raja of Kalinga, another of Sarata ... and Shakuni.

‘Be now Lord of Life!’ the Holy One whispered in my ear. All withdrew. I hurried behind them. I wanted to see the Buddha but I could not reach him for each step that I took in their direction led me further away from them. Then a figure, almost invisible, approached. I knew it was the Buddha. He stroked with his cool hand my feverish forehead and said: ‘All that is earthly disappears and has a disappearing shadow, except the light of the Buddha. That remains even when Chandra is extinguished, when Surya is extinguished, when the stars are extinguished in the eternal night, because it is inside all that is.’

‘Sir, tell me, how can I cleanse the blood ... my guilt ... off my hands, my legs, my face ... off my cloth?’

A soft blue light emerged over the fields, the forests and the Ganga, lighter and lighter ... I did not know from where. It was as if it arose from all plants and human beings, animals and things, giving no shadow, because the light was from inside, out of everything and it filled the world with a great bliss, because everything knew its connectedness with all life ... eternally ... eternally ... eternally. And I felt it like a fresh breeze flowing over my head ... my body, my hands, my clothes. I looked up and the blood had disappeared, wiped away by the invisible hand. And now it is as if the immense burden, I had carried, will not crush me any longer, as if I can wrest myself free from it ... in Buddha's eternal light-without-a-shadow. Why did not the Buddha appear himself in my dream, Asandhi?

‘Because he was a human being and a human being only. The *bodddhi*, the divine wisdom, was not revealed from above but is one's own virtue and purity, the connectedness to the all, fulfilled by oneself, within oneself: the ultimate of what a human being can ever attain and what we eternally will garland with our fantasy. The soft light, that gives no shadow, because it is from within ... the Dharma of my great King. Buddha did not appear, because it is not the human being that is of importance, but the eternal cleansing light: the light of the light of the radiating Sun.’



THE LIGHT WITHOUT SHADOW

With tranquillity, energy soon came back to Ashoka. But the compelling recollection of the Kalinga War impelled him forward. He held a world power! How to wield this in such a way that as long as he and his sons, his grandsons, and descendants, governed, such disaster would never recur in his empire. The peoples, the leaders, the priests of his countries had to understand, that war was the greatest calamity that a human being can ever invite upon himself. It is the curse of creation: the destruction of humaneness, the fostering of hatred and revenge, the rash judgement over life and death. Ever more audaciously, his thoughts tugged: to organise his empire, guide it towards peace, to a dignified existence for all.

Was not war a result of greed in the sinful human being, of placing one's self above others for the sake of riches, desire and veneration that it brings along? Were all people not of equal worth? Was not the only difference that of lust for power? Then that lust for power had to be expunged.

Or, was war the very consequence of savageness, the absence of compassion for other human beings? Was it not the final outburst of predatory vestiges within the human being, the tiger who once he has tasted them, devours more humans? Then, that tiger-nature had to be silenced.

Or, was it out of ignorance and the misunderstanding of all the signs which accumulate and lead to the final disaster? Then, that ignorance had to be overcome.

Or, was it the lust to fight, the lust to torment the other human being and animal, the lust to smother innocent victims? Then, that lust had to be smothered.

Or, was it fear, the fear of life, to arm oneself against the bloodlust of others, the need for assurance, to get the feeling of security? Then, the cause of that fear had to be taken away and security must be brought to the empire.

If all that could be achieved with power! The inner attitude was false! How to proscribe that lust for power, that savagery, ignorance, bloodlust, fear of life, that could fuel a war, from the mind of the people! To bring the inner attitude of the Buddha: peace, compassion, joy for life and will to live, acknowledgement of the worth of a human being! Was that possible with power? How? He realised that it was not enough for him to be an upasaka of the Buddha. His own Buddhism had not prevented him from entering into the war with the Kalingas. He had not counteracted their thrust towards war with the compassion, the love, the right attitude of the doctrine of the Tathagata. In his delusion, and trusting upon his powers, he had brought armies to battle, arranged battlefields, and brought death, the annihilation of hundred thousands living beings, and misery to those who escaped death. He had brought in his enormous power against theirs, to destroy what he should not destroy: life ... and not destroyed what he should have: the hatred, the revenge. He had fallen short in his sacred endeavour, had accepted what he wished to condemn, the most bestial of all afflictions, the madness, the total madness of war. He had only been a worshipper, not a follower of the Buddha. Now, he wanted to learn the doctrine: the spirit, the deeper inner knowing of the teachings, to imbue his powers with the will, the recognition of the value of each human life and the all-embracing compassion of the elevated Holy One of Kapilavastu—inseparable as salt is from the sea—so that he never would fall back upon the humanly degrading means of murder, the lawful murder, that does not satisfy, but feeds the lust for new murders, kindling it to a blazing fire.

Ashoka turned to Sagata and became a Bhikshu, who strives to seek the doctrine, not the initiations. Upagupta, son of the perfumer Gupta in Kashi,

became his teacher. Day after day, the Maharajah went to the Ashokarama, discussed with Upagupta the life and the work of the great Holy Man from Kapilavastu. The deeper the Maharajah penetrated into the spirit of the Buddha, the more outlined the Dharma, that he deemed necessary for his peoples, rose up before him, like a temple founded in the minds of living beings, built over with protecting roofs, towering over his empire, shedding the light of the Buddha, the light that casts no shadow, because it is within all beings themselves; the light that is not implored, not descended, not received by willingness to sacrifice, but that is from the Atman and comes, basking, to awareness in the human being, to spread blessings around ... the happiness of the Khemavana.

And from the palace of Pataliputra the light spread out, over all India.

War was forsaken, followed by the abolition of the hunt and the slaughtering of animals for the kitchens of the palace. Everywhere he encouraged the establishment of infirmaries for men and for animals. For travellers and pilgrims, he improved the roads and had planted shady banyans and fruit trees, had wells dug for drinking water and built rest-houses along the great traffic routes. The Dharmamahamatriya outshone all other government buildings. It was there that the ideas of the Maharajah were realised, edicts were written that will spread all over India; mahamatras were educated here, examined if they could carry out the intentions of the great Emperor with wisdom, compassion and kindness, towards man and animal. It was here that the construction was decided upon, of viharas, sangharamas, and thousands of stupas. All peoples of India had to realise that Dharma would bring happiness to all.

Nevertheless, messages came in continuously from all over his vast empire about governors who did not understand the significance of the example he set, peoples who persisted in their inhumanity, priests who preached for their own gains and not for the happiness of his subjects.

In the fifth *kalpa*, the Maharajah adjourned with the Agramahis to the lotus-pond. There he often discussed with her what most moved his inner being. The boat glided slowly along amongst the palms, blossoming shrubs and flowers that garlanded the banks. To the rhythm of the helmsman Vatsa, the dark rowers put their oars sedately into the water, in deep respect for the sacred Maharajah, who was seen by all slaves of the country as their holy master. They were filled with pride that they could row the great Maharajah and the beautiful Maharani through the waterways. Vatu, a black slave,

once had dived under the lotus-pond so long to seek a precious piece of jewelry that Asandhimitra had thoughtlessly dropped into the water, that he came up half-choked, and even fainted, as he handed it over to Asandhimitra. The Maharani had given him his freedom but, weeping, he had begged her to be allowed to stay.

‘Thousands of edicts leave the Dharma-department and reach my rajukas. Many messages come in from informants that show that my will is not being conveyed to my peoples, Asandhi.’

‘Can you not reach the peoples themselves, my Maharajah?’

‘The peoples themselves such as the Achemaenids in Irania ... edicts of stone at temples ...’

‘At least there, where many people will pass by or gather.’

‘And then everlasting, in stone, and clear, not in the language of the learned Brahmins but in the language of the peoples. On the big roads, at crossings, in holy pilgrim-places ... We will engrave them on memorial pillars, in rocks. Have pillars sculpted and erect them. Dharma - pillars crowned with the symbols of the Tathagata.’

Ashoka rose from his seat.

‘Please, sit quietly for a while. Manu¹ did not create the world in one hour! He is still creating her!’

‘You are right, Asandhi. Would it be possible to make pillars of stone, tall and heavy, crowned by a lion ... or a wheel ... perhaps an elephant?’

‘A new and great thought, my king.’

Again, Ashoka stood up.

‘Let it first sink in, my beloved Raja. I see that your eyes radiate the light even before the fire within has kindled well.’

He laughed. ‘The flame could corrode within as well.’

‘But the glow remains, my Lord.’

Just then Satyavat approached the bank and announced: ‘The rajuka from Kalsi, Sire.’ The rajuka was invited on to the boat.

‘Rajuka from Kalsi, you persecute severely the forest tribes of the Himalayas. You know that I want peace with all people at my borders.’

‘They are Dasyus, Sire, their skin is as black as that of the Aryans is white. Their minds are darkened, as that of the Aryans lightened by the knowledge of the Vedas.’

‘Which, Rajuka, is forbidden for the Shudra by the Brahmin varna! Of what value then is your ennoblement if you prevent others from it deliberately? Can you blame the Vaishya that he does not harvest, if you take away his harvest-knives? The Ashoka-tree, that it does not spread its lovely blossoms, if you keep all rain away from it? Your mind is dark because you hide in a deep cavern so that the light of the world cannot reach it, foolish rajuka. I offer you the opportunity in the Sangharama to brighten up your dark, loveless principles, with the light of the great Holy One.’

‘Sire, there lives a heretic sect! I cannot mingle with them without making myself impure.’

‘Then you cannot be a Rajuka for Aryans and Mlecchas without making yourself impure. So, I dismiss you as the rajuka from Kalsi.’

Just as the rajuka stepped ashore, Rauma approached the vessel.

‘My Rauma! Blessed are you, for your work in Sodra. You will become rajuka of Kalsi.’

‘I thank you, gracious Maharajah. But I have bad news from the Kalingas. Pestilence of cholera and small-pox scourge the unfortunate country. The diseases will become a danger to Magadha, Sire. There are not enough men, so that famine waits. The war has depraved the customs and traditions of the Kalingans, Sire. The people mock the priests and the older ones, they laugh at orders and prohibitions. Crime is increasing appallingly. The country is impoverished.’

Ashoka reflected a long time. ‘Rauma, for Kalinga I was the Lord of death. Now I want to be the Lord of life. Next week will be the anniversary of my consecration. I want all death sentences to be revised, reprieve granted, when mercy is possible. And I want all captive Kalingans who were transported to Pataliputra to be released, when mercy is possible.’

‘When is mercy possible, Sire?’

‘When I can expect that they will take up their work regularly again, Rauma. Also, when they recognise my Dharma or have taken refuge in Buddha’s doctrine, or have expressed their sadness about the war that took place, or, for those who long for their kin, then forgiveness is possible. We want to raise up the Kalingas. Vatsa, row us ashore.’

‘My Lord has enjoyed his rest, Rauma,’ laughed the Rani.

‘When I am with you, my Asandhi, peace descends into my heart and I feel revitalised with new energy. I myself will take care that a huge amount of medicinal herbs are brought to Kalinga for those dreadful diseases and that immediately a large number of physicians and attendants will leave. I will then send officers, free from hard-heartedness, free from cruelty. Here, I have, for security’s sake to intervene myself.’

‘Yes, my Lord!’



ALONE, THE GREAT JOURNEY

In *Chaitra*¹, when Vasanta's young energy² drove nature again to abundance and the amra woods blazed in a red glow, when god Kama shot his flower-arrows made of honeybee-barbs into rapidly beating hearts, and laughing girls, with *karnikara*³ flowers behind their ears and ashoka blossoms in their black tresses, adorned themselves with garlands of white jasmine, Sayana burned his wooden spoons, threw the stoneware into the water of the pond, put on his red-brown cloth made from tree-bark, and strode towards the Ganga. There, he took off his sacred thread that connected him with the Aryan community, cut off the top-knot of hair that connected him with his family and threw both together into the sacred river. He then went to the palace of Piyadasi, who sojourned with Asandhimitra.

‘My Piyadasi, I have bid farewell to life and seek from now on to complete my last days as a sannyasin.’

‘We are very much moved by your decision, holy Sayana. It grieves us deeply to know that you are no longer in your hermitage. We had hoped that you, who never hesitated to place your wisdom at the service of truth and of all living beings, would be touched one day by the Light of the Buddha, that brightens a world of untruth and loveless-ness, that awakens the pure humane consciousness that is founded on the eternal truth, existing deep

within each human being; what will diminish the suffering of all, by kindness and compassion, and destroy the frightening web of priestly lies which tried to suffocate them, that searches for release, by releasing others.'

'I want to be wholly a Brahmin, my Piyadasi. Let the Shudra serve, the Vaishya feed, the Kshatriya fight and organise, the Chandala roam around varna-less, each seeking their own release. I see the world as a workplace, where everyone's work is indicated by his birth, where everyone can either allow himself to be guided or strictly choose his own way; where sometimes one wanders off in great confusion to seemingly beautiful fields, and then, regains awareness and turns towards the silent road of the eternal, the 'Ultimate Refuge'. Is it of importance whether one needs a hundred or a thousand incarnations, or whether one, as an animal or as a member of a higher or lower varna, strives for his release? Of the people who ascend to the temple, one is inside the sanctum sanctorum, the other one at the gate, the next one yet on the road towards it, many a person still far from it. It is of importance that one keeps a clear eye on the jewel at the top, or if one loses sight of it, out of an inner compulsion, in spite of one's self, looks for it again. A tiger which feeds the panther cub that has lost its mother, a street dog which saves the young ones from his enemy—the mongoose—from a burning house, the Vaishya who takes care of the dying pilgrim, the Brahmin who teaches the Vedas, the Maharajah who supports his subjects with a far-reaching eye on their arduous path and creates for everyone the freedom to choose for themselves their path, all this according to the place assigned to them in a new birth ... in everyone, in depth or at the surface, surges the desire for the 'Ultimate Shelter'. It is not of importance to me, who knows this, which sect I choose, with death dawns a new beginning. All is included in the fullness of the eternally evolving life in Brahman, in the Atman. I believe I have reached the destination; to become a Buddhist would mean for me a descent to another birth. I wish to enter my last phase of life. Life has to evolve gradually, step-by-step, striving upward through all the *ashramas*⁴ by which the human being becomes more and more purified from all earthly endeavours and so becomes worthy of his Ultimate Shelter, that floats over the earthly maya as the 'true existence' ... *Brahmannirvanam* ... Atman ... eternally ... eternally ... From now on I turn away from the bodily being, for me exists no longer 'I', nor 'Thou', no world. I am without hatred and without joy. My senses have found rest. Alone, the great journey ... You cry, high Rani ...'

Asandhimitra gestured lightly with her delicate hand so that her bangles tinkled softly and melodiously, like a pure voice in the silence of the dawn.

‘It is not from sadness, holy Sayana. It is not from happiness. It is the vibration of my soul with this happening that grows irresistibly, and flowers ... that follows its pathways to the supreme, in the hermitage and in the Emperor’s court, in the Vaishya’s farmstead and the Shudra’s hut, equally, the same way. Because it springs from the same source and is ever rising again, good and beautiful, even when beaten down. That is why it is good that the holy Sayana goes his way and you your way, my Maharajah; you, who recognise the four noble truths of the Buddha: of sorrow, its cause, its cessation and the path that leads to its cessation. Come, great Maharajah, let us be united with the Holy One.’

She and Ashoka walked around the holy man three times⁵, their right hand stretched towards him. Then, silently, Sayana blessed the Maharajah and the Maharani.

Ashoka accompanied his friend until they were outside the city’s gates. There, they bade farewell and each went his way without looking back, without tears, the way the *Kantha-sruthi-Upanishad*⁶ prescribes for father and son.

Ashoka ordered Girika to send three messengers after Sayana, who were to keep an eye on him until his death. Thereafter, his body had to be burned according to Brahmanical rites, the ashes to be saved and brought in a *kamandala*⁷ to Pataliputra. Thereupon, the mahamatriya of construction was entrusted with the building of a small stupa that would contain the ashes of the Holy One, at the place of Sayana’s forest-hermitage.

‘Pfft! Prince Agnibrahma. How were Chandragupta and Bindusara able to live without a Dharma-mahamatriya! This is the brain and the heart of the holy Maharajah, where his mind stirs and heart throbs.’

‘It is the temple of the Buddha,’ Sona thought.

‘The Kovidara-tree of Ashoka’s heaven.’

‘Stupa after stupa is being built. Now the Maharajah has embraced a new idea. In Iran are temples with inscriptions which glorify the war deeds of the Achaemenides. The Maharajah wants edicts carved out on rocks, near the big roads of his empire, at the borders, in crowded pilgrims’ places, at crossings of traffic roads, and that in an indestructible way, so that his

subjects and strangers will for evermore know what is the best way to grow to happiness: in this life and the hereafter. Where there are no rocks, memorial pillars will be erected, beautifully carved, substitutes for the earlier sacrificial poles at temples, that will convey his ideas: inscriptions, which will proclaim the will and wishes of the holy Maharajah for centuries to come. These pillars will be crowned by the symbols of the Buddha: the Lion of Kapilavastu, the White Elephant, the horse Kanthaka, the holy Bull, and the Wheel, that set the doctrine of the Tathagata in motion in Kashi.'

'And do you think that the Maharajah can regulate his great empire forever?' Kala remarked, a Brahmin well-known for his cynicism.

'No, Kala, that only the Brahmins could.' ...

'Let us admit that their control failed. But do not think that Buddhism will do better because it is now on its victory march through India and that now everyone is charmed by the will for goodness of the holy Maharajah. But what when the Maharajah dies? Who knows? After Tishia's death many new elements may enter the Ashokarama and other monasteries, even former sacrificial priests, and by uttering just one simple formula they can enter the sangharama and so assure themselves of an easy life. It is easy to seek refuge in the Buddha! Too easy!'

'But the sacrificial priests have proven to which situation the long tutelage of Brahmacharins can lead.'

'Even this mighty Maharajah will not be able to root out the corruption that always crosses the world of the good: beside the Brahmin, the Chandala, beside the Buddha, Mara.'

'"Good", in worldly sense, is always opposed to "evil". "Evil" is there, so that it can disappear by the wish to strive for "good". If you do not find the "evil" anymore in your striving towards "good", Kala, worldly life can stop for you, you can ascend to Nirvana.'

'Nirvana! For the time being, we are still here at the Dharma mahamatriya. I just heard that even here the corruption ... Shush! There comes the Maharajah with the rajuka of Bhadravati. You will hear something!'

'Vangisa!' All looked up, startled. Vangisa approached, trembling, and fell down.

'Get up! Who are Bharata and Silata, two Purushas I do not know, who have been sent to the rajuka of Bhadravati to raise the incoming fees for the

Maharajah?’

‘Two of my friends, Sire.’

‘From which mahamatriya?’

‘Not from a mahamatriya, Sire.’

‘Who promoted them to become Purushas?’

‘I, O, Maharajah.’

‘You! With the consent of Agnibrahma?’

‘No, Sire. During the time that the Prince was in the Ashokarama.’

‘And what about Sona, who replaced him? And my consent?’

Vangisa sank to his knees again, bent deeply and kept silent.

‘Who added the seal to the government parchment?’

‘I, merciful Maharajah.’

‘Who are these two purushas?’

‘Sire, I came to know them.’

‘Where?’

‘At Prakriti, Sire.’

‘So, loafers, gamblers, drunks! How much was your reward, wretched one?’

‘I received from each ...’

‘Do you know your oath? Where is the gold?’

‘Gambled away, merciful Maharajah.’

‘Gambled away!’ Ashoka’s voice filled the hall. All looked in anxious suspense. Suddenly a chakra glittered above Vangisa. Agnibrahma raised both his hands.

‘My Father ... Kalinga ... the Buddha, O, Maharajah ...’

Ashoka slowly lowered his hand.

‘Yes, the delicate-blue scarf. You will make a pilgrimage of five years along the holy cities, Vangisa. Be off! Come, high Rajuka. Send the two Purushas to Pataliputra. And learn in this mahamatriya, what is my will and order.’

The three informants carried back the Kamandala.

‘Stand up and tell the Maharani and me about your journey, Tarkika.’

‘Gracious Maharajah and Agramahisi, we soon caught up with the holy Sayana on the road to Rajgriha, and told him that the Noble Maharajah had

ordered us to protect him. The sannyasin looked at me for a long time. Then he spoke: 'Your Maharajah is the Lord of all life, in Kalinga as well. But for me there does not exist a Veda anymore, no varna, no seen and no unseen, no I, no thou, no world. Neither grief nor desire touches me, neither beauty nor ugliness. I am without hate and without joy. Every stirring of the senses, every earthly longing has come to a rest. I am released of my self, part of the Atman, which is all that fills my awareness. If your Lord wishes to protect my body, then that is his need, not mine. I wish to keep silence and not be disturbed.' Since that day he did not speak one word anymore. He drank, cupping his hands, breathed the wind, ate fruits and roots on his way. Never did he touch the fruit that we respectfully put beside his sleeping place. Rather, he begged for alms at the door of a dwelling, not bothering whether it was a Brahmin, a Shudra or Chandala who gave it. He slept, stretched out on the bare ground or sitting against a tree. The rainy season brought him to the city, where he stayed in an abandoned hut, and lived on food that the most despised people brought him. In turns, we kept awake at his humble dwelling, chasing away boys and girls who tried to disturb his peace. The rains had barely slackened when his life, shorn of all objectives, drove him out again. A bride, adorned in blossoming splendour, asked for his blessings. He did not notice her. He let heavy rain lash against him at the barren rocks. His state of blissful silence led him along whimsical roads he did not choose. Snakes and predators that frightened us did not touch him. On a beautiful day, when paddy and sugar cane waved in a fresh breeze, and ponds adorned themselves purple-red with lotus flowers, when the ashoka-tree and the jasmine showered their orange and white wealth, and the proud lilies danced in the wind, when the kovidari trees seduced the bees with their scent, and the vines weaved their flower-wealth in garlands through the jungle and the abundance of nature did pound at our hearts, all of which seemed to glide, unnoticed, by the sannyasin ... we saw how from behind the bushes, a huge tiger with a single big leap, landed on the silent walker, killed him with one blow and dragging along his prey, disappeared into the jungle at full speed. Our arrows reached only the trees. We rushed up, looked and searched, but the dense shrubs prevented us from penetrating where only animals rule. Nothing remained of the sannyasin, Sire. For more than a week we have tried, armed with sharp knives, along hacked-out pathways, to find but one single bit of his remains in that jungle. All in

vain, O, Maharajah. The kamandala contains nothing but the memories of the holy Sayana.'

Ashoka beckoned. 'The kamandala will be placed in the stupa of Sayana.'

'My Lord is sad, that not a small speck of dust remained of the great friend?'

'What consolation do you have for me, my beloved Asandhi?'

'The soul returns to its source, the All-one, my Lord, from where it originated; as support for us remains the beautiful memory. After a thousand or a hundred thousand years and what after all are they in eternity, all that lives is forgotten. Sayana, I, you ...'

'Not the Dharma, my Asandhi, which is from the Atman, not the light of the Tathagata, which is without shadow, which is in all things. They illuminate the path of peace and humane-ness, which will lead to the 'Ultimate Shelter' of all life. If the power, entrusted in my hands, can engrave for humanity Sayana's memory and the Dharma, as eternal signposts in the hardest of rocks at the Right Road, then I will one day die satisfied, too, my Asandhi.'

'Blessed art thou, my wise King. And yet they will be but faint witnesses of the peace, the justice and the happiness, which you are giving to a world empire.'

'Alone, the great journey.'



APPENDIX

THE EDICTS OF ASHOKA¹

In rocks, pillars and in caves, Ashoka had carved many edicts, spread over all the kingdoms of India, in the language of the people. From these many—and often voluminous, elaborate—inscriptions found in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the following are some of the most valuable fragments.

‘Thus saith Devanampiya Pyadasi² (His Sacred and Gracious Majesty):

For more than two and a half years I have been a lay devotee (upasaka). But I did not exert myself thoroughly. For over a year, however, I have been closely associated with the Sangha and exerted myself strenuously. The gods who up to this time were not known in India (Jambudvipa) have now become known. For this is the fruit of (my) exertion. Nor is this to be attained by greatness only, because even by the small man who exerts himself heavenly bliss may be won. For this purpose the proclamation has been made: Let the small and the great adhering to dharma be united in spiritual effort.

—MINOR ROCK EDICT – I – Brahmagiri – Fruit of exertion’

This was addressed at Suvarnagiri to the officers in Isila in the tenth year of his consecration:

•

‘Thus saith His Sacred Majesty:

Father and Mother should be respected and so should elders; kindness to living beings should be made strong and truth should be spoken. In these ways the Dharma³ (Law of Piety) should be promoted. Likewise a teacher should be honoured by his pupil and fitting courtesy should be shown towards relations. This is an ancient rule that conduces to long life.’

— MINOR ROCK EDICT –II – Law of Piety

•

‘What I consider to be righteous, I wish to be implemented in practice with the right means.

Because you are placed above thousands of souls with the purpose to obtain the love of my people: All men are like my children. And as much as I wish for my children that there will be taken care, of their wellbeing and happiness in this world and the hereafter, as much I wish so, for all human beings ...

The governors always have to make attempts that no imprisonment of civilians or torture will take place without a sound reason. For that I will send every five years mahamatras ... who have to ascertain if the legal judicial officers, understanding this purpose, act according to my direct order.’ ...

‘Only this is my wish in relation to the border-peoples: they should understand that the King wishes them to be free of fear for him and they will trust him. They should understand: The King is for us as a father; he feels for us as much as for himself; we are for him like his children.’ ...

— KALINGA-EDICT II in Jaugada

•

In the third column of the rock-inscription in Dhauili (Tosali) this first Kalinga-edict was carved, an order to the high officers of Tosali.

•

‘This edict is made at the order of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King: No animals are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice here, nor should any samaja (unworthy feast) take place here ...

Formerly in the kitchen of H.M., daily hundred thousand of creatures were slaughtered to prepare the meals. Now only three living creatures are killed, two peacocks and a deer ... In the future not even these three creatures will be killed anymore.’

— ROCK EDICT in Shahbazgarhi

•

‘Everywhere within the domain of H. M., and among the peoples beyond his borders the King made provision of two types of medical treatment ... medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals.’ ...

— ROCK EDICT in Girnar

•

‘Therefore if my sons, grandsons and their descendants should follow until the end of times my footsteps, they too will do what is meritorious but he who only neglects part of his duty, will do ill. Verily sin is easy to commit.’

...

— ROCK EDICT V in Mansara

•

... The King wishes that everywhere people can stay of all different sects, since they all wish for mastering of their senses and purity of thought.

— ROCK EDICT VII in Shahbazgarhi

•

On Tolerance:

‘His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King, honours both, ascetics and householders, by gifts and honours of various kind. His Sacred Majesty, however, does not value gifts or external reverence as much as he values that there should be a growth of the sara, the essence of all religious creeds. The growth in essentials assumes various forms but have as their root restraint of speech, what is: not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good reason. Criticism should be for specific reasons only and should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions. By so doing, one’s own religion benefits and so do religions of others. Whoever praises his own sect, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought: ‘Let me glorify my own sect’, only harms his own sect.’ ...

— ROCK EDICT VII in Shahbazgarhi

‘... For who honours his own sect but condemns sects of others, only because of dedication for his own, with the intention to glorify his own, in reality insults by his behaviour his own sect in the worst way.’ ...

— ROCK EDICT XII in Girnar

•

‘... That ceremony is very fruitful, which is connected with Dharma. Amongst these are: decent treatment of slaves and subordinates, respect for teachers, curbing of cruelty against all living beings and generosity to Brahmins and Sramanas.’ ...

— ROCK EDICT IX in Kalsi

•

‘The perfect white Elephant (Buddha), is indeed bringing happiness to the whole world.’

— ROCK EDICT XII in Girnar

•

‘But what implies Dharma? It includes compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness.’ ...

— PILLAR EDICT II

•

‘Eight years after the consecration of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, the Kalingas were conquered. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were taken captive and deported, about a hundred thousand were slain, and as many died as a result of war.

After the Kalingas were conquered H.M.’s observance of the Dharma, his love for the Dharma and his propagation of the Dharma became stronger. The Emperor felt remorse for having conquered the Kalingas. Where an independent country is subjected by force, there will be as a result, killing, death and deportation of people, what is now looked upon by H.S.G.M. as very grievous and regretful.’ ... If a hundredth or a thousandth

part were to suffer the same fate, it would now be matter of deep regret to His Sacred Majesty.'

— ROCK EDICT XIII in Shahbazgarhi

(This cry of a remorse haunted soul did not appear in Kalinga, but in Shahbazgarhi, North of Takshasila. W.K.)

•

'... and the most important victory in the eyes of His Sacred Majesty is the victory of the Dharma' ...

'... It is my desire that there should be uniformity in law and uniformity in sentencing. I even go this far, to grant a three days' stay for those in prison who have been tried and sentenced to death. During this time their relatives will be able to undertake steps (at the rajukas), to save their life, or have the judgment revised.' ...

— PILLAR EDICT IV

•

'...That what is alive should not be fed to other living.' ...

... These edicts on the Dharma have to be written where there are pillars of stone or polished surfaces so that it will be retained for eternity.'...

'... As long as my sons and great grandchildren will rule and as long as the sun and the moon will shine, the monk and the nun who cause partition in the Sangha will have to take on white robes and live outside the convents. For what is my wish? That the Sangha may be united and for a long time so.'...

— SANCHI EDICT

•

‘This place was worshipped by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King, consecrated for twenty years, visited by him in person, because here the Buddha Shakyamuni was born. A stone, carrying a figure (horse) had to be made and a pillar of stone erected, to indicate that the Blessed One was born here.’ ...

— From the memorial-inscription on THE PILLAR in LUMBINI

One of the cave-inscriptions:

‘This cave in the Khallatika-hills was donated to the Ajivikas by H.M. the King, in the twelfth year of his anointment.’

•

In the thirty-eighth year of his rule Ashoka died; that is the year 232 bc.

•

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1. Present-day Bharuch.
2. Caravan leader.
3. Leader, head of an organisation.
4. The kingdom of Buddha's father, Suddhodana.
5. Scribe, a clerk.
6. India.
7. The drunken elephant that was unleashed on the Buddha to kill him but could not.

Chapter 2

1. Natives, tribals.
2. One of the many legends derived from the *Mahabharata*.
3. A mark made in the middle of the forehead that symbolises a relationship with another, with a deity and is usually made with ash, vermillion or sandalwood paste.

Chapter 3

1. Could be the mountains above Syr Darya river, that flows into the Aral Sea.

2. North of Taxila.
3. Betel-nut palm tree.
4. God of Death.

Chapter 4

1. Hot summertime.
2. Dakshina: Dakshr means South. Here is meant the region that is in the Southern part, here meant: of the Deccan Plateau.

Chapter 6

1. Enclosure.
2. Decorated gates.
3. Sunset prayers just when the moon is over the horizon.
4. Shiva's wife.
5. The wife of King Rama of Ayodhya in the epic *Ramayana*.
6. Rama's realm.
7. The present day Konkan region.
8. Physician.

Chapter 7

1. Near the source of the River Narmada.
2. Rudra, another manifestation of Shiva, is the patron of physicians.
3. Bharata, Bhararataavarta, is another common name for ancient India.

Chapter 8

1. Jyeshtha: half May, before the monsoon. Sharad: mid September-mid November. Hemant: mid November-mid January.
2. Hired priests.
3. The one ordering the sacrifice.

Chapter 10

1. The marshland at the foot of the Himalayas.
2. Early July when heavy gusty winds blow.

Chapter 11

1. Indigenous breed of horses used by the Central Indian tribes.

Chapter 12

1. Song of creation, *Rig Veda* 10, 129.
2. Valakhilya-song RV 8.8.2.

Chapter 13

1. Here meant a Buddhist monk; a recluse.
2. Buddhist mendicant monk.

Chapter 15

1. Positioning of hands to mean something or convey a meaning.
2. First month when rains begin, starting mid-June.

Chapter 16

1. June, July.
2. Now Orissa.
3. The assembly, here: council of ministers.
4. The number One official, Supreme official.
5. Scribe, writer of documents.
6. Conqueror of the devil, conqueror unlimited.

Chapter 17

1. Karmikara and kimsuka: trees; Animukta: creeper, Priyangu: creeper, whose flowers bloom at the touch of a woman.
2. Another name for Sita, Rama's consort, daughter of the King of Mithila.

3. Digha-Nikaya.
4. Another name for Buddha, literally: 'thus came, thus gone', coming as a breeze, going as a breeze.

Chapter 18

1. Highest Rani.

Chapter 19

1. The thread ceremony, 'upanayanam' is the initiation of a Brahmin into the Brahmin fold. Even today orthodox Brahmins wear the sacred thread.
2. Pippala or Peepal, Bodhi tree.
3. In this case, Purusha not only means a palace functionary but also an excellent man, a Krishna.
4. Tube-rose, white rose-like flower, extremely fragrant.
5. From West (Gandarva, nowadays: Kandahar region Afghanistan)- to East (Anga), North (Nepal) to South (Dakshina).
6. Literally: Sun-shine, resplendent sun.
7. Followed even to this day in temples at 6 AM. The priest awakens the presiding deity by Vedic Chants to come and bless the seeker.
8. Lord of time, Lord of art.
9. Almighty Lord.
10. Deccan: present day Andhra and M.P., Maharashtra.
11. Dakshina: the southern States.
12. Gondyana: Larger Central India, now south-east and north-west of Maharashtra.
13. Majjhima-nikaya.

Chapter 20

1. Crown Prince, heir to the throne.
2. The king from the earlier dynasty.

Chapter 21

1. The bushy tail of a gaur, a wild ox, Bosgaurus.

Chapter 22

1. Indian fig tree.
2. Lay-Buddhist, one who waits upon in service.
3. Garden of gods.
4. The revered one, a holy one for Buddhists.
5. Stories about earlier incarnations of the Buddha.
6. Three Buddhist monasteries, forest hermitages. The word 'Vana' means forest.
7. 'Becoming released', compulsory confession in Buddhist monastery.

Chapter 23

1. Here meant: the Buddha. Dharma: the sacred laws, cosmic spiritual laws.
2. The word: bhikshu is derived from 'bheek', which means to 'beg'. Thus a monk is literally a 'beggar', who has forsaken every attachment, including his family, home, etc.
3. Flowering medicinal plant.
4. *Bhudda Saranam Gatchami; Dharmam Saranam Gatchami; Sangham Saranam Gatchami*, is recited even to this day by a Buddhist upasaka.
5. Buddhist convent.
6. From Oldenberg: 'Reden des Buddha'.

Chapter 24

1. Regions to the North-East. Yaksha means demi-god, Mani refers to Jewel while Pura means a country.
2. The layered tower over the main temple.

Chapter 25

1. The Buddha.
2. Highest provincial representative, Governor.
3. A tree of learning mentioned in the Sanskrit work, *Ritusamhaara*.
4. Semi-gods; happy souls.
5. Scholar priests who wrote treatises.
6. Scholar priests who wrote treatises.
7. Four-sided mushroom-like shelters.
8. Latest king of the Nanda dynasty, notorious for his avarice.
9. Buddha.

Chapter 26

1. The Summer corresponding to the months of Jyeshtha and Ashadha.
2. Heavy rains; a shower of rain.
3. Autumnal season (Sharad) and winter season (Hemant), both comprising of two.
4. A particular military array that was called 'chariots of the Sun'.

Chapter 27

1. The bushy tail of a gaur, a wild ox, Bosgaurus

Chapter 28

1. Seventh Manu, progenitor of the world.

Chapter 29

1. Seventh Manu, progenitor of the world.
2. Vernal South wind from the mountains.
3. Type of flower which has excellent colour but no smell, mentioned in *Kumaarasambhava* and *Ritusamhara*.
4. Stages of life.
5. A reverential Salutation by circumambulating from left to right always turned towards the person.

6. One of the thirty smaller or minor Upanishads.
7. Holy vessel.

Appendix

1. The choice of the edicts is of the author. For the English translation a compilation is made of different translations and interpretations.
2. Devanampiya Pyadasi (resp: One who the gods favor, and: One who is of gracious mien) is in line with earlier scholars (Vincent Smith) considered to be a title, and translated as: His Sacred and gracious Majesty.
3. Dharma' in English comes closest to 'Sacred Law'; interpreted too as 'cosmic law', laws of existence; universal laws of energy, materially and spiritually, for balance and harmony.

Ashoka: The World's Great Teacher

Book III

Ashoka was flowing with the milk of human kindness, and his love and sympathy embraced the whole animate creation ... It was an absolute benevolent monarchy, and Ashoka laid special stress upon the paternal principle of government ... He believed that followers of all sects aimed at 'restraint of passions and purity of heart', and therefore he desired that they should reside everywhere in his empire (R.E. VII) ... so that there may be a growth in mutual reverence and toleration (R.E.XII) ... These truly are lofty sentiments, which may bring solace even to the modern distracted world.

— Rama Shankar Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*

Part 1

***THE BEAUTIFUL EYES OF THE
PRINCE***

AND EVER FLOWED AND FLOWS THE GANGA

Meditatively the *Yuvaraja*¹ plucks at the strings of the veena. Its soft velvet timbre resonates through the new stone wing of Ashoka's palace. He sits alone in the high verandah enclosed by an airy scalloped marble wall. Through the fine filigree of flowers, branches and leaves, there is a transparent view on a hall, its natural stone walls polished with great skill to an effulgent greenish bronze. The verandah offers some protection from the searing sun burning savagely down on the small, hedged-in park before him. Young areca palms, shrubs and flowers of distant origin serve to mask the encircling wall that separates it from the Ganga. The tall, slender pillars of the verandah are joined by crescent-shaped structures, resting on lotus-shaped capitals, lending support to the luxuriant leaves of the vines, which, like beguiling garlands, hang over the high portals. Each portal opens to a broad staircase descending to the waters of a pond hewn out of stone. Faint bas-reliefs of animals grace the base pillars which offer bathers support as they descend the steps. The carvings stretch on to the other side of the pond, where a herd of stone elephants spray refreshing water through their raised trunks, making the pond's surface softly ripple;

white and sweet-red lotuses rising ever aristocratically from the light-green undulating leaves partake in the movement.

The Yuvaraja pauses for a moment as he looks at the rays of the sun creating a rainbow on the falling spray on the other side. Transparent water, transparent sunlight, and an arched rainbow of delicate colours cover the spray like gossamer-thin muslin. Is it *Rohita* whose invisible rays gambol in the water with its treasure-trove of colours? Serenity of the spirit of Nature, in the pulsing of *maya*? Rohita! He takes up the gleaming red burnished veena and lets it lean against his shoulders. His arms embrace the neck of the instrument and sweet sounds echo softly in the hushed space. Outside, on a peepul tree in the corner of the park near the wall, a bird is dusting off the sluggish slumber from its feathers, and trills its flute-like song with the Crown Prince's music. The Prince looks down from the verandah to the park clad in summer brilliance. He reflects, 'Why does everyone extol my eyes? Do they also praise my invisible heart?' He wished they would not. His beautiful eyes, his lean body, his mouth, his nose, are a gift from Prajapati, the Creator, his guru says. Do they also praise his father's eyes which radiate with goodness, love, and compassion at all his wise decisions? When the women of the court seek to place their arms around his shoulders he tries to get away. It is at those times that he flees to the stone pond, takes up his veena, and sings away the vanity they wish to provoke in him. Praise Rohita, the divine core of the Sun. And his clear voice, deep in timbre, sings a measured melody, accompanying the instrument:

‘Soaring high up, divine countenance, smiling upon us,
From Mitra-Varuna, from Agni the eye,
And glowing over heaven, earth and space:
The Sun God, moving the All, that is²

Rohita took form in the beginning as Time, as Lord of all Creation.
Rohita, the One, who with His rays roves over sea and earth;
Gliding through all of heaven. He is its sovereign.
It is heaven, ocean and land that since eternity, He guards.

He wraps himself inside the womb of earth,
In heaven itself, in the space of the air,
He permeates distant worlds in proud flight

To the soft rose glow of the other shore,
Rohita, rich in *tapas*³, has ascended to heaven,
Even as he, from Mother's womb is reborn,
And is to the gods their chosen sovereign,
One, who moves the All, to all sides is His gaze,
To all sides stretch His hands; to all sides are His palms.
He, the one God, ever on His way, carrying on His arms,
Carrying on His wings, heaven and earth ...'

Ashoka has come to the verandah. He pauses, turning silent and unwilling to trespass upon the music that touches him, especially with the beauty of Kunala's voice. When his son falls silent and the last vibrant tones of the veena fade out into the reaches of the gallery, he approaches.

'So, my son, do you wish to be the udgatar, who accompanies the soma offering.'

Kunala walks up to his father, who has descended a few steps towards the pond, 'No, for me music is a goddess to be worshipped, whom I wait on in submission when I am free of the duties you impose on the Yuvaraja.'

Ashoka looks at the play of the sun on the droplets.

'Are these duties an affliction for my dearest son?'

'No! Guruji tells me: 'That which you do for mother and for father you do but for yourself as it enhances your karma.' But like Mahindra, Sanghamitra, and Agnibrahma, I too have the urge to go to the Buddhist Sangha, which shelters the strength to spread the sacred teachings of the *Tathagata*⁴. Yet, I do go to the army camp to practise, I witness the *parishad*⁵, listen to what your advisors have to say and to what my wise father reveals as his decision. I keep up with your judicial decisions. But sometimes, it is as though a secret power inside me draws me away from all that duty imposed upon me and demands of me the surrender of my heart and mind to something that stirs from within, that refuses to be still. It is stronger than all that assails me from outside. Then I take up my veena and play and sing until the balance restores itself. Is it wrong, my Father, for a Buddhist to play and listen to music?'

'For a monk of the Sangha who strives for Nirvana: yes.'

‘The monk acquires his inner peace, the restraint of his rebellious thoughts, or the directing of his will towards the good, by devoting himself to the Buddha, the Teachings and the Sangha. But for me it is through music that my soul finds strength, when I pour my heart out in the songs. And the veena for me has many secrets yet to be discovered.’

‘Rohita, as the Goddess of the Sun,’ laughs the Maharajah.

‘Rohita! If they told me that the Buddha is Rohita, that Brahman is Rohita, that the Atman, which unfolds itself through Rohita is Rohita itself, I will believe them. Take away Surya from heaven, my Father, and life ceases within the depth of darkness ... ‘the divine countenance smiling upon us!’ The wheel of eternal order of the thousand-fold life, ever on its way, never pausing, not cleaving, and yet not hurtling down from heaven, and moving to its own laws. Is that not the greatest miracle of life? My guru teaches me that Nirvana is only to be obtained by control of the senses. But why then did Rohita create our senses! Is what we feel as beautiful, sinful? Or, is it the restlessness which our senses create in us that is sinful? When a thousand questions assail me and guruji only answers: ‘Buddha says’, ‘the path’, ‘the Nirvana’ ... when everything in me seethes and my heart is pounding to learn as right, and not as sinful, all that is beautiful and good in my life, then, my Father, I play and I sing what my soul dreams of and is driven by, and then it is as if I already understand and know. Then peace restores itself. And you, my Father?’

Ashoka puts his arms around Kunala’s shoulders and together they walk out into the park, climb up to the farthest corner from where they watch the Ganga flowing wide and mighty, carrying the ships, cradling on its waves the bygone Aryans.

‘Has the Ganga ever known rest, my son? They say she merges with the ocean. But ever flowed and flows the Ganga. She never **is**. The monsoons turn her into a raging torrent. When Jyeshtha⁶ comes, her surface becomes calm, her course peaceful. Generations of men appear and vanish. Everything becomes; nothing just is. Like the flame of a lamp never is the same flame, all the time burning different oil, never remaining, so the Ganga today, will not be the same Ganga tomorrow. And so you will not be tomorrow, what you are today. Everything is in flux, eternally changing. The Ganga is the continuously dying and reviving heart of Aryavarta, it gives to the country its fertility and vitality. Likewise I never found rest,

never sought it, but sometimes longed for it. Just as the Ganga does not know why she becomes and nourishes, I too do not know. I want the Maurya to rule in Pataliputra, to inspire the people of India with vigour and spiritual strength. Life has propelled me from being a 'wild Prince' to becoming a ruler. How long yet? I demand of no one that he thinks as I do, but that he strives for the essence, the *sara* of each religion, because that is what is eternal. There I wish to bind the peoples and hope that others, after me—and you, too—will take this task upon yourself, not for your inner peace but for their inner peace, not for your happiness, but for their happiness. I wish to clear the way for anyone who longs for this, whatever his varna. That is why you must choose for yourself, as I chose for myself. Buddha, after profound talks with his disciples, said: 'Here are trees, contemplate and discover for yourself.' So, I too, shall bring my son to a place where the wings of his thoughts can soar freely under the endless sky, in the refreshing air of the *mahavana*⁷, at the altar of flowers of a sage, like Sayana.'

'By your life and your example, my Father, you are of more value to me than a Sayana. Yet, deep down, I often doubt: will your decision not to wage war anymore, not place India in danger? Alexander the Great, the Macedonian, came up to the eastern borders of the Punjab. Which peoples live around us on the other side of the Hindukush? Renouncing all warfare means placing us at the mercy of enemies as brazen as the Kalingans. What vigour does Buddha's teaching of love have, if it falls prey to those who scorn it? The evil one has to know that the sword of justice awaits him, my Father.'

'I was told that 'hatred one does not cure with hatred, hatred one cures with love.' India begins to understand the Buddha. Other peoples will follow. Once when all nations revere the Buddha, war will be banished.'

'But great is the danger when they suspect you of weakness.'

'Weakness? An army of ...'

'... that you no longer wish to use in a war that you renounce! Is it possible to renounce war? Erase it from human life? Or is battle, maybe war, necessary, law, nature? You may not want it. And I may not either. But who will succeed us? Were you to do away with your army: you are at the mercy of every conqueror, who casts his greedy eyes upon our land. If you use your army, you counter the teachings of compassion of the Buddha.'

And if you embrace the teachings of the Buddha, you will be lost even to a lesser country than the Kalingas.

‘Buddha’s teachings are of such beauty that alien kings and peoples too will be touched by them. A war one seeks out of self-interest. But he who reveres the Buddha will erase that self-interest from his heart. And fear of our army will deter anyone from invading India.’

‘Alexander the Macedonian, my Father!’

‘Has been repelled by a far weaker enemy.’

‘India will become weaker as more subjects embrace Buddha’s teachings.’

‘That is a blessing that will spread throughout the world.’ Kunala remains silent. Every discussion with his father runs aground at this point.

‘Go to the mahavana, reflect, and discover for yourself, my son.’ When Ashoka disappears into the palace, Kunala reflects at length. Eventually, he picks up his veena and plays, casting away his doubts.



THE HOUSE WITH TOO MANY DOORS

The Maharajah prepares for a swift journey to the hermitage of the Brahmin, Santanu, who had been Sayana's best pupil when Ashoka lived in the forest hermitage. Santanu visited many schools then built a hermitage in the mahavana, by the side of the Bhagavati River, not far from the road that leads from Pataliputra to Nepal. Riding along the road to Vaishali, the Maharajah reflects upon how everything has changed in the country; it has become obvious that Kunala will one day ascend the ivory throne. His son has shown a strong inclination to follow in his father's footsteps. Is this a genuine force that has surged within him, a will to act, to improve, to regulate, just as he, Ashoka, had felt from his earliest youth, steeled by the fierce struggle with all who opposed him? Will Kunala one day possess the strength, the self-reliance, required of him by an empire like Aryavarta? He could not entrust the empire to his oldest son, Mahindra. Neither to Jalauka, who laughs at the softness of Buddhism and serves Shiva with wild abandon, unreceptive to Buddha's teachings of love. Had he himself ever been as unresistingly obedient as Kunala? Santanu must make Kunala's will strong, broaden his insight. Has his son been weakened by the life at the court where everyone treats him with care, friendliness, and love, and where no conflict has as yet come his way?

After two days of stiff riding, he reaches Santanu's hermitage. The Brahmin comes up to meet him with a friendly welcome.

‘What makes Piyadasi, now the Maharajah, visit my simple retreat?’

‘Sayana often pointed to you, his former brahmacharin, when his plan to complete his life as a sannyasin had ripened.’

Santanu sighs. ‘Much has happened since Sayana saw as the loftiest pursuit the fulfilment of the four stages of life of a Brahmin, O, Maharajah, and showed us the path of the Aryans who chose the spiritual path over that of the material world. But the great multitude of people did not prosper by that. One evening, after you had left his hermitage, he said: ‘He who now leaves will one day be the Maharajah of India, a god to his people and a scourge to the sacrificial priests.’ Only then did we realise who you were.’

‘Sayana did not know that I would one day raise the teachings of a small sect to the religion of the Mauryas.’

‘He did certainly realise that, but thought that Buddhism would merely purify Brahmanism of its limitations. Where priests are attributed with supernatural powers, religion degenerates. Sayana adhered to the Brahminical laws, the sturdy rock in a turbulent sea. Is it not out of the same soil, that Rohita, with the same warmth and the same light, animates man, as well as animal or plants, Brahmin as well as Shudra, Buddha as well as Chandala? And no one is aware that all that lives is the unfolding of that same All-spirit. You, O, Maharajah, have sought the sara of each religion. You wished to make every human being aware of what binds all, eternally, to the All-spirit. You did not choose Brahmanism as the vehicle for your thinking about humanity. Brahmanism has locked up itself in a house without doors or windows, with only an opening to heaven, through which rain, hail, and lightning invade and rage. But is not Buddhism a house with too many doors, more doors than Brahma's offering hearth¹, so that each one may come and go too easily?’

‘One cannot restrict the entrance if one wishes to see that all walk the eight-fold path,’ smiled Ashoka.

‘But that goes against nature and is for a human being only to be achieved through persevering will. It may be easy to become a sramana², but a true follower of the Buddha becomes one only after an intensive inner struggle. Brahmanism is a complete circle of life, in which each one can realise a high spiritual ideal, or organise his life with simplicity. You are a

Buddhist and energetic, O, Maharajah, but do you not think it to be wrong that one can become a bhikshu so lightly?’

‘No, then I would not be a Buddhist. The nourishment of the bhikshus is sustained by the upasakas³. And that is good. One furnishes the material needs, and the other, the spiritual needs. Let each thus learn his duties and accept its advantages as natural. For he who cannot, the Sangha is not the proper place.’

Just then Santanu’s wife and his daughter approach. Each brings her hands together and thus touching their foreheads, bow deeply.

‘How many children were bestowed upon you, Santanu?’

‘Seven, O, Maharajah, three died, three sons are brahmacharins with friends; my daughter, together with her mother, takes care of my five brahmacharins.’

Ashoka looks admiringly at the beautiful girl with her narrow waist and shapely hips. The full and lovely formed shoulders, one of which is covered by a lightly flowered muslin cloth, curved gracefully up into a strong neckline. Her face is sun-brushed brown—the fresh jungle air contributing to the smooth and youthful tint—below which a deep and healthy crimson blossoms. Her eyes have the mystic darkness of the Aryans, almost black against the frail blue of their pools. Her symmetrical features express more nobility than friendliness, more intellectual independence than feminine submissiveness. Dark braids of her hair coiled on top of her head, giving her face an oval shape, and softening the firm lines of her cheekbones.

‘Kanchanamala⁴.’

Ashoka speaks some friendly words to the two women. When they have gone, he says: ‘Lucky is he who one day may call Kanchanamala the mother of his sons.’

‘May I, Your Majesty ...’

Ashoka interrupts Santanu with a raised hand: ‘I have come to ask you to take for some time my son, the Yuvaraja, into your house and your wisdom.’

‘You know, O, Maharajah that I admire the Buddhism in your Majesty, but I am a Brahmin.’

‘Precisely, because you are. Kunala still has the immaturity of youth. I want him to know Santanu even as I knew Sayana. Kunala is receptive, is soft-hearted because of his Buddhism which wants a gentle humanity. But

he should also come to know the nobility of the in itself confined Brahmanism.'

'As a brahmacharin?'

'No, as a friend of my friend, my Santanu.'



3

POISON

Three Brahmins are travelling on the road from Kashi to Pataliputra along the left bank of the Ganga. Now and then the water of the flowing river is seen shimmering through the dust-covered trees. When the view clears they see from a distance the faint outline of towers and buildings against the azure hot sky. One of the three, Utanka, a lively and energetic fellow, looks towards the east.

‘Look, the tall white building over there whose proud dome rises up above the city walls and the Imperial palace, is the Ashokarama.’

‘That is symbolically apt,’ remarks Shantanika, a slender and notable figure, his demeanour proud and naturally agile. His sharp, keen features are akin to those of a fanatical sacrificial priest. ‘The imperial authority was snatched by a powerful human hand, Utanka, the divine authority however is unfolded in the human’s inner being, and is a revelation of that which rules all life.’

‘Does that apply to the divine power of Buddhism as well, Shantanika?’ asks Sama. Shantanika does not notice the mockery that twinkles in Sama’s eyes. Entirely lost in his own thoughts, Utanka is even less aware. He is an educated Brahmin but has not been a sacrificial priest, unlike the other two. Sama’s tone betrays his sarcasm. His short, squat body and slightly wavy

hair may have resembled that of a Shudra if his Brahmin thread did not remove doubts about what he was.

‘Buddhism has the currents in its favour as does that boat on the Ganga over there.’

‘Why is that, Shantanika?’

‘Why? The Buddha has placed against the priests’ varna the Sangha, where there is no division of varna and where pure and impure does not apply anymore. He spoke only about what is good. He places against the Brahmin thinkers in their seclusion, the solidarity of all to the Sangha, against the petty outlook of Madhyadesa, the humaneness. In Aryavarta the hearts of the people were boiling over with resentment against the supercilious offering priests. World in need, salvation is on its way! Buddha’s call for reason, humaneness and compassion ... Buddha’s strength is that he gave up a life of wealth and luxury for a life of renunciation and hardships, to bring the truth to all. But it is a pity for Buddhism that he did not proclaim: ‘I am Brahma myself and will bring to you the Truth!’ Then Buddhism would have taken hold over the whole world.’

‘Heresy!’ cries an indignant Utanka.

‘Now they view him as a sublime human being who attained Nirvana, the annihilation, the melting into the Atman, to put it into words the Brahmin way. If we wish to join the Sangha, then we have to esteem the Buddha’s true worth, the Exalted Buddha, the Divine, raised up unto the highest Godhead. Or else, India will one day turn its back on him because every conceited *arhat* will dare to equate himself with him, because he thinks he too attained Nirvana.’

‘Heresy! In that way you want him to bring truth to humanity with a lie!’ snaps Utanka.

‘If humanity does not acquire the truth of the Buddha then it will regress to the lie of the sacrificial priests.’

‘You are too virtuous, Utanka, and you think that all people will be virtuous enough to accept and follow the Buddha in his simplicity. But which rich merchant will give up his riches for your wisdom, which rajuka or Raja will leave his palace to contemplate in the jungle, which wealthy Vaishya will drive his livestock away and wrap around the yellow cloth, in order to beg! Because of your truth!’

‘Tss, tss, tss! Shantanika! That is for those who want to attain Nirvana,’ Sama says with a laugh.

‘Truth is that which the Buddha has taught us!’ replies Utanka.

‘Are all of Buddha’s sutras then true? His gathas, his legends, his Jatakas³,’ Shantanika goes on.

‘Is the truth in the words or in the meaning within?’

‘For the masses in the words, for the wise men in the meaning ...’

‘Precisely, Shantanika,’ mocks Sama.

‘How different the perception of the beautiful body of a charming woman by a penitent, a lover, and a tiger:

The penitent thinks: she is merely a body,

The lover thinks: she is worthy to love,

The tiger thinks: she is a good meal.’

Utanka looks at him with contempt. ‘You are to accept the Buddha as he taught us not as you would wish him to be! That is true heresy!’

‘Do you believe that the monks who are sent out by the Ashokarama, the Yetavana or the Kemavana, convey his words as he has taught them? Do you not think that we Indians, with our vivid imagination, will deify the Buddha, and correctly so, raise him more and more above man and imagine him more and more distant from us in his even more glorious magnificence?’

‘That depends entirely on the way in which you present his teachings! Those legends, with flowering imagination, hold often more truth than the bare facts because in the mystical light of what is to us an unknown world, they assume forms that touch a suffering, sensitive humanity. The facts convince our mind, the legends our imagination and whisper to us the truth about our own atman.’

‘You talk of soul and atman, Utanka. This too is heresy for a member of the Sangha,’ mocks Sama.

‘Be quiet, Sama, you provoke me! Look, Utanka, Emperor Ashoka brings security, peace and prosperity to the country. Who will still wish to renounce everything, to be relieved of an ‘evil earthly existence’? Is Buddhism not the consequence of spiritual repression by the Brahmin priests and the worldly scourge of the rulers? Ashoka has swept both away. But his edicts, in their call to morality and humaneness, do not speak of the God Buddha, but only of his Teachings. And Buddha says: All that has

become, all that must perish. He himself perished, dissolved into Nirvana, the nothingness!’

‘You have become a heretic even before becoming a member of the Sangha!’

‘No, I want to save Buddhism from a certain downfall. Elevate the Buddha to what he is: a god, the God! And Buddhism is saved! Man does not want to be good but to worship and venerate the God, who is good.

‘And make Shantanika and the other once-upon-a-time sacrificial sprites, his priests! They will bring man to Buddha, the God, through mildness and a soft heart, and if that does not work, by threats of hell and damnation, with fear of miserable reincarnations, by banishment from society, and especially, with endless suffering!’ Utanka says bitterly.

Shantanika continues calmly yet sharply: ‘Man wants a Godhead, a shining symbol, Utanka, a rock in the cruel world, in his tumultuous thoughts: a personification of what rules his life, yet lies beyond his understanding.’

‘The bhikshu is a mendicant and not a middleman between God and man. He is a minister of the Tathagata’s teachings, possessing nothing that could restrain him. He bears testimony wherever the Sangha sends him. Learn from the simplicity of the great Emperor who proclaims what he expects from his subjects: a life the way the Buddha saw it; with reverence for parents, teachers and family, even for the life of animals; with people who show compassion and enjoy in other man’s happiness, who show kindness towards everyone, even to slaves. And tolerance! And truth! The Buddha is loved. Thanks to your priests, mankind fears God!’

‘The Buddha as God is a richly flowering fantasy, Utanka, which touches our heart and our imagination. Emperor Ashoka cannot do without his officers and warriors, his pomp and circumstance. And the Buddha needs priests.’

‘That is exactly what the Buddha did not wish to be, a temporal ruler; merely the Awakened, Accomplished Buddha! An example of the realised Man!’

The three Brahmins then approach the ferry. Others respectfully give way to them. The roughly built ferry carries them to the far bank in front of the western Ganga-gate, where they are immediately taken into the care of the foreigners-department. Here, as in the Ashokarama, where they are

brought, the influence of their varna is very apparent. Quickly, a venerable bhikshu and a number of young ones welcomed the three Brahmins. Water is brought for the feet, a dry piece of cloth, a bench, and footstools are put down for each of them. After they are served food, they ask the older bhikshu if they can be accepted as monks in the monastery.

‘Where have you come from?’

‘From Kashi, lord.’

‘What draws you to the Ashokarama?’

‘Respect for the Buddha, lord.’

‘Do you meet the requirements of a bhikshu?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘I will take you to the abbot.’

They are received by the old Sabahu, who is a Brahmin himself and a great friend of Mahindra, the son of Ashoka, head of the Sangha. His friendly face and charming manners quickly put the three travellers at ease. In turn he asks each of them the questions that are put to all newcomers, enquiring of their place of origin, their physical and their mental condition. Then Sabahu assigns to each an older bhikshu, also a Brahmin, who will assist them in their initiation.

‘This is an impractical kindness that will only serve to promote dissension within the Sangha,’ Utanka remarks.

The solemn initiation takes place a few days later. Utanka, Sama, and Shantanika have their hair shorn and their beards shaved. They enter the great vihara, each with their own preceptor. Each one wears the required three pieces of cloth and carries the begging-bowl. Utanka is the first to be led in.

‘Let the Sangha, reverent gentlemen, hear this: Utanka wishes to receive the *Upasamdan* initiation from the reverent Vimala. If the Sangha is willing, I will instruct Utanka.’

The Sangha remains silent to denote agreement. They proceed to the chapter. When Utanka has answered all the Sangha’s questions satisfactorily, the presiding bhikshu asks him to recite the three refuges, and Utanka proclaims earnestly, three times: ‘I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.’

The presiding bhikshu then says in a voice loud enough for all in the Sangha to hear: ‘Let each of the reverend brothers who is for the

Upasamdan initiation of Utanka, with the venerable Parna as instructor, remain silent, and each who is against, speak'... He continues calmly: 'Utanka has received the initiation with the venerable Parna as *Upadhyaya*.' The Sangha is in agreement that is why they remain silent. Thus I understand. Measure the shadow and tell the newly initiated bhikshu, what time of year it is, and which date, and tell him the four resources.'

The Sangha continues the ritual with Shantanika and Sama, and Utanka is told the four resources of the bhikshu: He must live on alms, wear clothes of 'found rags', seek his home under a tree, and use diluted cow's urine⁷ as medicine. But at the same time, he is informed of the special allowances: besides alms, invitations from upasakas; for clothes, fabrics of linen, cotton, silk, wool and hemp; besides living under a tree, viharas, upper levels and lofts of homes, caves; for medication: ghee, butter, oil, honey and molasses.

Sama whispers to Shantanika: 'I will keep to the allowances!' Shantanika silently absorbs the whole ritual. Utanka listens with great earnestness to the lessons of his upadhyaya, who explains the four forbidden acts: sexual intercourse, theft, extinguishing of life, even that of the smallest worm or ant; and to ascribe—motivated by malice and greed—supernatural powers to oneself which is not possessed.

Because of his sincere desire to follow the Buddha, Utanka begins to cultivate a friendly kinship with the better acolytes in the Ashokarama, Sama lowers himself to those who desire a more pleasant and easy life. Shantanika everywhere puts out feelers and listens alert, measuring everything against his great purpose: to give the teachings of Buddha a firm foundation. He knows with his wide knowledge that the Buddhism of Ashoka finds its way into the hearts of Aryavarta. And he understands that his endeavour will mean a conflict with the Emperor, the mighty disciple of the Buddha. Brahmanism permits itself some heaving in its lap but Buddhism is open to many opinions. Brahmins are easily welcomed. Is it not made too easy for the Shudras? Shantanika does shrink from greeting a Shudra while honouring him with a footstool, washing-water and towel. There are plenty of earnest fools like Utanka, but also others, who have retained their pride: to remain in control of the minds of the people, of the land, of the gods. A Brahmin is no Shudra or Chandala, not even in the Sangha. He is contemptuous of the sutra: '*for a bhikshu exists no varna anymore, all that is of this earth is for him transitory*'...

‘In the Sangha, they who think high, noble and humane, come together with the lazy ones, merely seeking a free bed and a free meal, and with those who are stupid and simple enough to equate the Buddha’s hallowed significance to that of an ordinary man!’ So, Shantanika remarks a few weeks later in a discussion with his instructor, Sivaka. All over the courtyard, standing or sitting, are monks in debate. ‘The first group remains faithful through to Nirvana, the second group until the fast, and the third until a new sage tells them differently.’

‘The Teachings of Dharma must unite everyone,’ says Sivaka. ‘With compassion!’

Shantanika laughs. ‘You wish to keep dry sand out of the Ganga in a sieve, Sivaka. No, it requires a closed and coercive system!’

Sama, who has listened quietly to the conversation, calls out mockingly: ‘Send the first group on a mission, supply the second with a good meal and a soft bed, and tell the third pleasant and sweet things about the Buddha! Then all will stay!’

His words, spoken loudly, attract many bhikshus, who prefer to engage themselves in seasoned debates rather than in pious contemplation on the Teachings.

‘No!’ Shantanika says. ‘That you get by regarding Buddha as a god, the God of justice and might, who knows to demand what he taught!’

‘Heresy!’ mock the others.

‘Heresy? Does the Buddha teach the Four Noble Truths or does he not teach them? And are they not all included in the creed: *‘The Buddha has the causes told of all things springing from a cause, and also how things cease to be, the Buddha has explained’*... Thus, Buddha answered the question: what is *dukkha*, suffering⁸, and how can one free oneself from it.’

‘Yes, yes!’

‘Has Buddha not correctly expressed to us the fourth Noble Truth: the eight-fold path, in the sutra: ‘Avoid all evil, set your heart on good, keep the mind pure!’ is not that the Teaching of Buddha?’

‘Yes, Yes!’

‘But has Buddha denied that there is a cause? Not in the least!’ Shantanika’s voice suddenly becomes emphatic. But of all those who so loudly called out ‘yes, yes!’ no one answers now. They understand that this is where heresy begins.

‘The Buddha did not want people to conjecture about life after death, of life or death, or the causes of life. He wished man to be released from his suffering.’

Visabha, saddened by the bickering, calls out: ‘Do then what the Buddha did. What you say is heresy!’

‘But the Buddha knows the answer! He is the all-wisdom, Brahma, the God! Otherwise he would not know these things, would he?’

‘May I say, young bhikshu, that you are speaking on matters that the Tathagata did not wish to answer. The monastery is not here to investigate imponderable scholarly questions, but to spread the Teachings of Dharma amongst all, without distinction. The holy Maharajah had the Ashokarama built so that the message of the Buddha would spread as a blessing throughout his empire. We, bhikshus, contemplate Buddha’s Life and Teachings, as he gave them to us, and we pass them on to all people. Is what you are wishing not: the elevation of Buddha to Brahma? That is heresy! The Buddha does not want veneration, but reflection on the Teachings. The Buddha was a human being who discovered the path. No harsh penance, no prying into the mysticism of life! Buddha wants to free you of rebirth, and for you to tread the sacred, eight-fold path towards Nirvana. The Buddha wants this not just for your own salvation, but for the welfare of the world and the well-being of all creatures!’

‘But does that make it sinful to ask: who is the Buddha, and what is Nirvana? Is it forbidden to think about the unseen? Has the Buddha himself not said: ‘Verily there is, thou monks, an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated and unformed. If such were not there, escape from the born, the originated, the created, the formed would not be possible.’ That is the word of the Divine!’

‘You are a heretic, Shantanika. The Sangha no longer understands its duty!’ Visabha bursts out. ‘Brahminical doctrines steal in. Impure minds spew their poison here. You violate the words of the Buddha!’

A fervent tumult is the sequel to Visabha’s words. Everyone is talking excitedly at the same time so that no one can hear the other. A few young monks get so angry that they lose control and could not keep their hands to themselves.



4

ANTIDOTE

‘Your doleful countenance does not suit the yellow robe, Girika,’ remarks Ashoka as the bhikshu enters. Kunala is always present when Ashoka receives the special messengers at evening time.

‘There is a reason for this sombre face, noble Maharajah. Some time ago a few Brahmins again entered the Sangha: Utanka, who is committed to the Buddha with all his heart; Sama, a mockingbird, a former sacrificial priest who could barely do without your care and lodging; and Shantanika, a scholarly Buddhist who from the first day on of his initiation proclaimed heretical views and finds a willing ear.’

‘Who is Shantanika?’

‘All three are Brahmins but the desire for power for his own varna is strongest in Shantanika, noble Maharajah. There are many in the Sangha who eagerly listen to his words.’

‘We shall put an end to this heresy, Girika. It appears that Mahindra is too weak for his task.’

‘The Prince has the loving compassion of the Buddha, lord.’

‘But he lacks the compelling mental fortitude of the son of the Shakyas. The true bhikshu worships him, the bhikshu who forsakes his duties and

who needs a stern hand ignores him. Are the bhikshus fulfilling their religious duties?’

‘The true ones are, Lord.’

‘Has the *pratimoksha*¹ been adopted again?’

‘No, Lord. Many in the Sangha fail to attend; differences of opinions with the superior and negligence in submitting to the *parisuddhi*² by the ill, make the pratimoksha impossible.’

‘Moggali Tissa³ wanted earlier strict rules to be implemented which I then rejected because I believed in the courtesy of the bhikshus. I now will request Moggali Tissa, who stepped aside for Mahindra seven years ago, to return. It is better that my son steps down than that the Sangha is lost.’

‘It is possible that the *tirthyas*⁴ are wilfully sowing confusion in the Sangha.’

‘Find out, Girika.’

‘Then, must Mahindra step down for Moggali Tissa?’ asks Kunala.

‘Certainly. We require a more powerful leader in the Sangha.’

‘And Mahindra, my Father?’

Ashoka merely shrugs his shoulders.

‘His great humaneness makes him too indulgent where stern intervention is required. He is unsuitable as leader of the Sangha.’

‘Just as I might be as Yuvaraja?’

‘You have fulfilled your duties excellently until now.’

‘Out of love for my father.’

‘May that love make you a blessing for India.’

‘That I want, too, my Father. But is your path the path that I must follow? Will your course also be mine?’

‘You still lack the self-reliance that is required of a Maharajah.’

‘My brother Jalauka ...’

‘Jalauka is a follower of Shiva, and Shiva is the god of the *tanha*⁵ through whom life and death transpire according to the laws of nature; who destroys and gives life by his will; but the Buddha taught us how we may free ourselves from the circle of life and death, from the maya, that our senses make us believe in.’

‘Is everything that our senses conjure up to us, maya? And a sin?’

‘Not sin. But we need insight into what presents itself to the senses in the world as lust, as *tanha*. That is why I am sending you to the hermitage of the Brahmin, Santanu. One day you will be Maharajah, sacred Maharajah. So, you should know what the sages teach, and give it careful thought.’

‘Brahmins have only the salvation of their own soul in mind.’

‘Not Brahmins like Sayana and Santanu. They are wise and great.’

‘When is someone great, my Father?’

‘The greatest man is he who takes upon himself the hardest suffering to release others of their woes.’

Ashoka takes action with great zeal and purpose. He sends a delegation to Moggaliputtatissa to ask him to return to Pataliputra as swiftly as possible and take on again the leadership of the Sangha. On the morning of the fifteenth of the half-month, when the moon is full, Ashoka sounds the *gantha*⁶. Its deep metallic voice peals through the whole Ashokarama and the park of the monastery. It is clear that this is for the pratimoksha, but many bhikshus do not take any notice of the prompting call. The monks are alarmed when Ashoka appears in the vihara. The Emperor moves to the seat of the leader and takes his place. He enquires if all the bhikshus are present or if they have sent their parisuddhi.

‘No, holy Maharajah, many take no notice of the gantha.’

‘I want everyone to be here, the fit and the ill, before the gantha sounds again. Those who do not come will leave the Ashokarama before sunset!’

There is a hasty scramble, a nervous bustle in the ashram. Diligent bhikshus search every cell, corridor, closet, the bathing areas, parks, garden sheds, pavilions and relaxation halls, in order to relay Ashoka’s message to the debating, chattering, ambling, and lazing monks. Sama, who after having finished a sumptuous meal is stretched out under the trees whose blossoms are used for the offerings, walks sulkily to the large vihara. The infirm are brought in on their pallets. The lethargic ones, who had not left their cells yet after the night, are now approaching the hall, alarmed. When all have sat down, the gantha sounds. Once again Ashoka appears.

‘Bhikshus, some of you are under the impression that I wish to spend a large portion of my empire’s wealth to provide you a comfortable and work-free life, for others to provide an opportunity to spin out their worthless

disputes. Know now and for always, that I have taken my refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, because I am convinced that this will lead to the welfare and well-being of my people and for many other peoples. But in the Sangha many are thinking of everything except the millions, who need the light which you were to bring to them and who now struggle in the dark. You have neglected your very first duty: the Pratimoksha; you have neglected your second duty: the practising of the Teachings which the holy Buddha proclaimed; you have neglected your third duty: to strengthen the Sangha inside, so that the Teachings of the Tathagata may be spread throughout my empire for the salvation of my subjects. I wish to know now if you are Buddhists and are aware of what the Buddha demands of a good bhikshu. You will have to answer my questions. And he who does not understand the three great duties, will leave the Sangha, takes off the yellow robe and put on the white cloth, which is ready for him, and which he will wear until he understands his duties and knows them thoroughly. He who has given me a sufficient account of his knowledge and his convictions will stay here, and prepare himself every hour, for the great task that he has taken upon himself, namely, spreading the sacred Teachings of Dharma throughout my empire. From now on, the Ashokarama will work towards this end, day after day, month after month. I will tolerate heresy no longer; I will tolerate no longer the neglect of duties by the lazy ones and the foolish who would rather proclaim their heretical opinions than release their souls and that of my subjects from miserable incarnations ... You will now conduct pratimoksha.'

The Emperor leaves the building. Enforced diligence compels the monks to perform their duty.



DROWNING IN THE BEAUTIFUL EYES OF THE PRINCE

In the first quarter of the moon the small caravan under the leadership of the Kshatriya Kappa proceeds on its way to the Bhagavati. The ponderous, swaying, ambling of the elephant contrast with the clattering clip-clopping of the horses' hooves on the forest road, and the fast stamping of the oxen, pulling their carts. The panting of the animals whooshes and the medley of sounds wearies the Yuvaraja, who, as his wont, gazes stiffly into the far distance. His thoughts go to his father, ever engaged in work, who expects of him one day to follow in his footsteps. Father had to struggle for the power, but he, Kunala, merely has to take over for the well-being of India! To arrange it according to his own discernment, says Father. He has to choose himself his path. Does Santanu know what is right? What is wrong? Which thoughts must one restrain? Santanu, who does not revere the Buddha? Kunala shuts his eyes as though sleep has overcome him. The rhythmic swaying of Vida's broad back on the signals of the mahout makes him drowsy.

Late in the afternoon they reached one of the rest-houses that Ashoka had built along the main roads of his empire. The tents are put up hurriedly, the animals refreshed in the nearby river, and meals prepared.

When the pilgrims who are staying in the rest-house overnight, awaken the next morning, the Maurya has already departed without even having disturbed their sleep.

After a few days' journey, Kunala's troop arrives at the white bungalow of Santanu. The late afternoon sun permeates through the dry foliage and an oppressive heat pervades the still, heavy air, suspended under the trees. The extended house of the Brahmin is encircled on all sides by a wide verandah, so that doors and windows are beyond the reach of the sharp sunlight. The slim white pillars, topped by a simple crown, are holding aloft the overhanging roof; at their base, low, adjoining partitions separate the rooms from the surrounding grounds. The bare sand prevents snakes from approaching the house unseen. Below the leafy, sloping roof is the airy space where members of the family stayed. Squirrels jump from the roof into the open rooms. Birds fly in and out. Tall trees and smaller palms are all around the spacious surroundings. A few banyans have choked out all plant life under their dense green and brown foliage, making way for the air-roots that dangle from their branches, to reach down to the earth. Outside lies the mahavana, which extends to the Terai¹, and yonder, the chain of the Himalayas with their gleaming white peaks stretching up to the blue heavens. A few pathways lead to the rippling Bhagavati, others penetrate into the depths of the jungle.

The arrival of Kunala's troops brings life and movement to the quiet sanctuary. Santanu, with his white cloth of the Brahmins wrapped over the bare upper body and left shoulder, respectfully approaches the Prince and leads him to the verandah. The brahmacharins arrange for a bath. Santanu's wife Amba and his daughter, Kanchanamala, prepare the meals. Under Kappa's direction the tents for the accompanying troops are put up outside the premises of the house. There, they will sleep and stay on guard for the safety of the high Yuvaraja. All are trusted warriors of Ashoka.

In the evening, when twilight carries the inky-black vapour rising from the depths of the mahavana to the tops of the areca palms, and the waxing moon plays its light in the dark stillness, Santanu's family sits on the verandah, with Kunala and Kappa on either side of their host. Amba offers each a cup of sweetened milk. As she hands the Yuvaraja the cup, she says:

'Life in our house is simple, noble Prince. I hope I may serve you with this gift from one of our cows.'

‘Your gift is a gift of the gods and even more precious by the loving hand that proffers it, mother Amba.’

Kanchanamala’s eyes are captivated by the strange Prince, who, as though from a fairyland, has suddenly entered their rustic seclusion, and who is now and then observing her with his large, mysterious eyes. What brings him, who lives in that fabulous Palace in Pataliputra, to the simple Brahmin’s house in the mahavana? How will this tall slender young man in his fine garment, looking even finer in the soft light of the moon, with his gorgeous silk turban embedded with precious gems wound carefully on his head, whose pensive wide open eyes are staring as though they penetrate into far limits, be satisfied with life in the forest? The brahmacharins wear scant clothing. Their attitude is one of natural courtesy but the Yuvaraja’s every movement, every word, his voice, his figure, his dress, is of such a refinement and sophistication—unknown to life in the mahavana—that she falls silent.

‘Let us taste what you have baked, Kanchanamala.’

Kanchanamala disappears shyly and quickly into the house and returns with a skilfully crafted plate of rosewood, filled with a dozen lightly baked brown cakes. She proffers it first to the fairy-tale Prince.

‘They are like the fresh evening air of the mahavana, Kanchanamala, sweet and soft to the mouth.’

‘You flatter me, noble Yuvaraja. Our rice fields provided the flour, the cows butter and milk, the bees the honey. And Agni’s fire gave the lightness and the colour.’

Santanu joins the conversation: ‘That is how it is with everything, dear Kancha: the earth provides the means but the human mind shapes it according to its skill.’

‘Blessed is he, who is given the right skills. My Father says: it’s not only the work itself that counts but the love and will to perform it.’

Santanu nods: ‘I knew your father when he lived with us, with the holy Sayana. With us he was a brahmacharin, with the wise hermit, a philosopher, and a Kshatriya when Hasta besieged him. We called him Piyadasi, but felt that he was different from us and we disapproved. Later, when he became commander, Viceroy, Maharajah, we understood him.’

Kanchanamala notices how a smile suddenly brightens up the rather sombre but beautiful face. He looks at her with his shining eyes.

‘We certainly do not disapprove of the admirable hidden skills of Kanchanamala, this first taste is encouraging,’ laughs the Prince.

Santanu suddenly and poignantly remembers, how the young Piyadasi never uttered words, in which no deeper meaning could be conjured.

‘A judgement of the senses, noble Prince,’ Kancha replies, lightly mocking the Prince’s courtesy.

‘The senses are the doorways to knowledge.’

‘Maya!’ she laughs.

‘A beautiful maya, then!’

‘For the Buddhist, the cause of suffering,’ remarks Santanu.

Kunala’s eyes assume a thoughtful expression.

‘That is to say: the trishna, the craving, which is maya.’

‘Let us go further, O, Yuvaraja: that trishna is the deeper source of sin and sorrow but also the very life-force.’

Kunala looks at him: ‘The Buddha taught that man must strive to transcend, to annihilate that life-force. Then sin and suffering will be removed.’

‘That is what the bhikshu wants, he who strives towards Nirvana.’

‘Just as Mahindra, Agnibrahma, Tissya and my sister Sanghamitra, do.’

‘Yes, they all regard annihilation of suffering as more paramount than the power to watch over people. And you, noble Yuvaraja?’

‘I feel respect and paying obeisance to my parents to be my noblest duty. My father wants me to take over his governance, his watchfulness and love for the peoples one day. I do not wish otherwise.’

Kanchanamala looks at him with admiration. Her brothers follow the laws of Manu that apply to all Aryans. That includes obedience to the father, but goes far beyond all the earthly duties. Putting one’s own personal and spiritual concerns aside for the peoples! Sacrificing one’s own salvation for that of the peoples’ including the non-Aryans? She cannot understand but it evokes in her a rare emotion. For a short moment she smiles. Two are struck by that smile: the Prince, in whom it also evokes a strange sensation, and the eldest of the brahmacharins, Katcha, whom it strikes like a sharp arrow into the chest.

Katcha has developed an unseemly love for Kanchanamala. Improper, because a brahmacharin has to learn the Vedas and renounce all that is not connected to it. He must gather wood for the holy fire, and graze the cows

on behalf of the guru. He has to awaken the Brahman within, in the form of the Veda, and become one with it. He has to observe and practise renunciation by chastity, by obeying and serving the guru. 'Brahmacharin' means 'walking in Brahman' and that should exclude all temptations of the senses. That is why his love for Kanchanamala is sinful. He really does want to suppress it; until his tutelage is over. Then he will ask his father to acquire Kanchanamala for him as his wife! And now the Yuvaraja appears! Does he, Katcha, not notice her sparkling eyes, her shyness, when the Prince looks at her or speaks to her? After his tutelage he will become a grihaprastha² and establish his family, and then he wants Kanchanamala to be his wife. What does that Yuvaraja want here! He is not even a Brahmin! Not even a brahmacharin! He, Katcha, is a Brahmin!

'Do you behave as you do because you are a Buddhist or out of respect for your father?' asks Santanu.

'Because I love and revere my father.'

'Is your love more important than the call of your own eternal soul?'

Kunala looks at him, surprised. 'How can I know if my love for him has come from this incarnation or from the eternity, holy Santanu? I feel the love for my father as the divine within myself.'

'Did your father feel the love for his father in the same way?'

'His father is not my father.'

'Or, did he follow his own path even when it was not the same as Bindusara's?'

'That does not apply to me. Our opinions may often be different but our will is the same, the happiness of the peoples. One day, I wish to follow his footsteps: My will, will be like his will.'

'You will be blessed and holy as your father, noble Yuvaraja. But it can only be: the direction of his will!'

'Why, holy Santanu?'

'You will need to find the answer to that yourself, high Prince.'

Kunala keeps silent. And all around keep silent, lost in their own thoughts. Kanchanamala looks at the Prince, and Katcha at her. In the deep silence of the moonlit night the crickets chirp their monotonic song amidst the mysterious sounds of the woods.

'Another day fades into eternity and a new day awaits; gather your strength to spend the next fruitfully.'

Amba and Kanchanamala immediately stand up and respectfully bid farewell. Kancha cast one more look at the fairy-tale Prince. Santanu takes the Prince to his lodgings. When the brahmacharins have finished their task of taking care of Santanu they light the small lamps by the door to welcome the gods into the house. Then they also retire. Katcha is the last. His mind is troubled by intense, forbidden thoughts of which he is unable to rid himself. He must control them because he is a brahmacharin; but he cannot subdue them because Kanchanamala permeates his whole being.

The next morning he is the first to rise and leave the Brahmin-house to go out into the grounds to gather wood for the holy fire. The night, which only increased his restlessness, had engraved a deeper line onto his gloomy face, not because he won over his senses but because of resistance to his fate. The desire for power which the Yuvaraja seems not to know becomes more rooted in his proud Brahmin-heart. With grim submissiveness he fulfils each prescribed ritual to the gods. When the first rays of the sun shine through the air roots of the young banyans, Kanchanamala opens the door and steps outside. The night-dew is still fresh and cool on the verandah and its simple pillars. She stretches her limbs, radiating pure happiness. As do all in Tirha, she experiences in the depth of her consciousness her dependence on the sun, which sustains life and growth and joy in the heart. Early each morning, she welcomes the blazing eye of MitraVaruna, the soul of all life. Now, especially. She raises her shapely arms, puts her hands together to her forehead and bows:

*'Oh, Sun goddess!
Queen of heaven and earth,
Bestower of light,
Bestower of strength,
Holy art thou!'*

Katcha looks at her pure face, now turned towards the rising, as yet invisible, sun-god, and he knows that he is violating his *brahmacharya*³. How can he, in his proud Brahmin heart, gather the strength that will elevate him above all in his surroundings, above the gods, in order to achieve what he has aimed for so long! Kanchanamala, foremost! Day after day he will have to bend low under the burden of his brahmacharya which he keeps transgressing. Until today there was security for the future that

made victory over his emotions easy. Now that security is gone! He must re-win it, in order to walk peacefully in Brahman and to remain an untarnished brahmacharin!

‘Come with me, Kanchanamala, to look for firewood. The night has troubled me.’

Kancha laughs. ‘Troubled you? One who walks in Brahman? Come, Katcha, what troubles the oldest student of my father?’

She walks slowly with him in the direction of the mahavana. Birds warble, ravens—in the highest tops of the banyans—float upon the springy branches and caw their songs of death amongst the awaking life below, while colourful parrots seem to laughingly mock human joy and misery.

‘Kanchana, You!’

‘I!’ She stops, looks at him seriously and surprised.

‘Kancha, I want to ask my father, when he brings the disciple’s offering⁴ for the holy Santanu, to ask for you as my wife!’

She is alarmed. All brahamcharins pay her respect as the daughter of Santanu. But this is sinning!

‘You lose sight of your duty, Katcha. As a brahmacharin, you are not allowed to speak this way. You are to abstain from such thoughts and become one with the Veda. Father says you must purify your inner being, become Brahman by imbibing the Veda within you, through purity and mastering the senses. Why do you burden yourself with sin, by paying attention to life beyond the sacred life of the brahmacharin! I do not wish to be the cause of your iniquity. Take your duties as brahmacharya seriously and do not make a temptress of me.’

Kanchanamala wants to return home but Katcha, driven by his fierce jealousy, grabs her by the arm.

‘Kancha, I cannot live without you! Restlessness urges me forward; the teachings do not enter my head because I, while knowing you near, am not allowed to approach you.’

‘You are doubly sinning now, Katcha: You are not supposed to look at women, you are not supposed to touch them. How will you release yourself of this two-fold sinning! Let me go. Restore your purity.’

‘Kancha, say only that you will wait for me until I have completed my apprenticeship. Then, in the certainty of your love, I will be able to return to my duties! A thousand times a day I shall repeat the three sacred rites a

month long, to be freed of this sinning, just as a snake sheds its skin. Kancha, give me that peace!’

‘I will not offer you that peace! You yourself must earnestly fulfil your duties and restrain your emotions. Free yourself from your unduly temptations, overcome yourself. That is what my father, your Guru, wishes.’

Again Kancha wants to leave, but jealousy now overpowers Kancha’s whole being.

‘You drown in the beautiful eyes of the Prince!’ he cries out angrily.

Kancha turns pale but looks at him calmly. ‘My way should not be of any concern to the brahmacharin of my father!’

‘You want to be the Maharani!’ he hisses at her.

She waits a moment to steady herself. ‘My wishes should not be the worry of my father’s brahmacharin!’

‘But they do worry me: ‘And if a woman had ten men who were not Brahmins, and a Brahmin takes her hand⁵, then she would be his wife alone! The Brahmin does not encounter obstacles in his choice’.⁶

‘My father will decide my fate, not you or a Veda-saying!’

She then turns away from him. Kancha bows his head and walks to the mahavana, muttering the sacred word ‘ Aum ’, the Vyah-rituals and the *Rig Veda* verse to Savitri. For one month, he has to repeat every day, a thousand times ... to cleanse himself. He looks for a *varuna*- tree⁷, which has miraculous powers in its wood, cut out an amulet that will chase away other suitors and protect him from the cry of the harbinger of ill-luck, the Shakuni-bird. He takes the piece of wood with him for the holy offering fire, wood from the sacred *Palashka*- tree⁸ from which the holy offering ladles are made.

When Kanchanamala approaches the house the others too have come outside into the grounds. The Prince greets her warmly.

‘Such a wonderful rest in these beautiful surroundings, Kanchanamala. Since you have just come from the woods, I assume you have already shown Rohita your respect.’

‘The cool morning gives strength for the day, high Yuvaraja. The mahavana rewards those who rise early and breathe the night air. And lucky are they that can absorb its beauty.’

The Prince looks at the svelte girl, in whose gaze he thinks he detects a soft hint of melancholy.

‘From our park we can look down on the holy Ganga. Her eternally surging waters provide a freshness and power and prosperity for Aryavarta.’

As he approaches, Santanu hears what the Prince says.

‘The pupils are waiting for the Veda-lessons; Kanchanamala will accompany you, O, Prince, to the waters that refresh and strengthen us here.’

But she wavers ... Katcha! Then she turns to Kunala.

‘May I lead you, high Yuvaraja?’

Silently, they take the path through the woods to the river. The guards follow at some distance. Kanchanamala looks at Kunala, surprised.

‘It is a precaution of my father,’ he explains.

The gurgling of the river becomes stronger as they near the Bhagavati. Kunala walks next to her.

‘Such beautiful stately trees, lovely Kanchanamala!’

‘They are simsapas, high Prince, and vikanbothas, from which the Brahmins use to cut out their *druvas*⁹. Those tall trunks there, Father calls palakshas. And you know the king of the forest that allows no other tree next to it.’

‘The Bodhi tree.’

‘Yes, *Asvattha*¹⁰, the leaves are called girls’ tongues,’ she laughs impishly.

‘Because they are pointed and shapely?’

‘No. Because they rustle even without *Vayu*’s¹¹ breath.’ She laughs, and Kunala looks at the girl whose grace and charming good cheer move him.

‘You love your house and the mahavana dearly, do you not?’

‘And the Bhagavati, and the high Himalayas, which you can see yonder through the dry leaves ... But you have not yet seen this valley after the rains in Sharath, as a bride, with the new green as its mantle and the blossoming blooms as its garland!’

‘Is nature more beautiful than you are, Kanchanamala?’ he laughs.

Kancha looks shyly at him and walks on beside him, pondering.

‘You are spoiling my mood, high Yuvaraja. Would you like it if I were to say that your eyes are more beautiful than Videha in spring?’ Again she

laughs. Kunala does not know why this allusion now strikes him as pleasant.

‘I tolerate poorly when one talks about my eyes,’ he mocks.

‘Well then, I...’

‘Except when a forthright Kanchanamala flatters me...’

‘I merely supposed so, noble Prince.’ She danced on cheerfully.

‘Is it not dangerous, proceeding here so carefree?’

‘The mahavana is slumbering in the heat of *Ashadh*¹². Snakes search for cover, even if it is the tail of a peacock¹³, she laughs. ‘Even snakes and mongooses lose their deadly animosity ... Look, there is the Bhagavati!’

Kunala had hardly noticed that they had neared the river. His eyes wander along the fast-flowing current. The fresh air is invigorating.

‘She carries the coolness from the high mountain snows.’

‘You do not know the story of the Bhagavati?’

‘No, by the side of our palace flows the Ganga. Tell me, Kancha.’ She reflects a moment.

‘In ancient times, along the foot of the Hymavanth, lived a vanaprastha with his wife, both Vaishyas, who had brought up their children with grace. When the sons of their sons were born, the parents sought out the forest, to live there in pious contemplation. One evening a Brahmin, who had practised asceticism in the Himalayas for a thousand years, approached their hermitage. Weary, he turned to them when they were in their twilight ritual in which they were never disturbed and in which they never expected to be disturbed. Hence, they were not aware of the Brahmin approaching, who, with his *tapas*, was more powerful than the gods, except Prajapati; they did not go to meet him, did not offer foot-cleansing water which they would not have withheld even from the most humble pilgrim. In his anger the proud Brahmin turned back, cursing the hermit before continuing on his way.

That same day the hermit was afflicted with an unbearable headache. His wife fetched cool water from the river, and soaked in it a cloth, which she placed on her husband’s head. The cloth soon became warm again and she once again fetched cool water, for a day, a week, a year, for years on end. A wise pilgrim told them that, as the result of a curse, he would live forever, so that the pain in his head would persist, eternally. The wife then wept bitterly. When she was to die, no one would take care of her beloved

husband and he would suffer forever. But Prajapati, the creator of heaven and earth, took pity on the good, elderly couple. He transformed the hermit into a hard boulder and his wife into a river, fed by the eternal snows of the Himalayas, and he guided the cold waters over the rock, so they would, forever, flow to Videha, cooling all that suffer. That is the Bhagavati: the one who brings bliss; she is worshipped just as the Ganga is worshipped.'

'And the vengeful Brahmin?'

'Will continue avenging.'

'And would you care for your unlucky beloved forever, Kancha?'

'If we were one in love and conviction ... certainly!' she laughed.



THAT WHICH MAKES YOU A BRAHMACHARIN

The brahmacharins have gone to the village to beg for food from those homes where the Vedas are known and where the rites are performed faithfully. Katcha walks alone on his path. He daily watches how Kunala and Kancha seek each other out with their eyes and how they walk to the Bhagavati. He spies on them while they sit by the river, talking and laughing, protected by the Maharajah's guards. He asks Santanu why those warriors are constantly guarding Kunala.

‘Think about it, my son, and hold your tongue about things that do not concern a brahmacharin.’

Not concern him? His happiness, his life—nay, his very karma—depend on it! Ever since the Prince has been living in the house, he has been neglecting his obligations to Manu. The thought that Kanchanamala is lost to him torments him like a demon. He forgets his rituals, returns home with too little wood, asks food from impure houses and stares at Kanchanamala which the Law forbids him to do. His hate for the Prince consumes his vengeful Brahmin heart; Santanu says this is just as disastrous for the brahmacharin as idle debate, slander, and lies. His frustrated love shows up in everything. He forgets the libations of water to the gods, to the rishis, to

the forefathers. But not bathing in the Bhagavati! When the cool water of the cleansing currents washes over his burning body he feels calmed. He wanders in the mahavana along elephant tracks to look for wood for the sacred fires. But he does not look with care, as he used to do, even though the heat under the branches of the trees is not as suffocating as the tension under Santanu's roof. He jerks back, a cobra lies on the path before him. The bundle of wood falls from his hands. Lazily the reptile slithers away, disappearing under the dry leaves hissing an evil thought into him: Could he but swing the snake at the face of the Prince! Folly! The guards! And a Brahmin never kills!

He approaches the house and flings the firewood over the smoldering embers. He walks cheerlessly towards Tirha¹. His own hurrying steps raise dust-clouds about him and the dust hangs suspended between the trees. From a distance, he sees—hidden under the high palms and banyans—the simple Vaishya huts, their roofs covered with leaves hanging far down over the loam walls. The lower portion of the front wall has been built to jut out towards the road and creates a bench upon which one can sit or lie down to rest and enjoy the evening coolness. Everything is quiet now. Katcha walks to the door of Matali's house. As is the custom, he lowers his eyes; as someone approaches he holds out his wooden bowl. Begging for food is an honour and provides great benefit to the karma of the giver. For a very brief moment he raises his head; it is Diti, the contemptible widow of Yasa, Matali's son, whose death was untimely. Grief has buffeted her and she patiently endures the indignities from his family. There are no sons who can protect her! For this reason she is reviled and treated as a slave. Kodini, Matali's wife, approaches with a ladle of rice. She pushes Diti aside.

‘Go away!’ Like a whipped dog, the widow slinks away.

‘Will you honour us by entering this simple house, Katcha? Would you like a drink of fresh water or a piece of fruit?’

‘Please, Kodini.’ Katcha enters where the sacred fire is burning.

‘Bring drinking water, Diti!’ she yells to her son's widow. ‘Get a cup. There are new ones in the soma-shed.’

When it takes too long for her to return Kodini gets angry. ‘It is difficult being saddled with your son's widow, Katcha!’ Katcha, too, feels insulted by Diti's delay as he wishes to take out his own ill-feelings on a despicable creature that is incapable of resisting.

‘Such a sinner should have been cremated with her departed husband!’

When Diti returns and starts to hand Katcha the cup, Kodini screeches: ‘Give it here! A Brahmin has no need for the likes of your company! Go away!’

Katcha leaves. He sees Diti at work on the grounds. She greets him respectfully but he turns away in disdain.

He proceeds to beg before the other houses. The heat becomes even more oppressive, and he decides to take a rest and sit under the shadow of a banyan to take some food. Just then Prince Kunala returns from an excursion on his elephant, followed by two armed guards on horseback. Katcha notices how Diti kneels down at the edge of Matali’s property and the Yuvaraja greets her amiably. He calls for a halt to his party and motions Diti over. Trembling, she draws near the Yuvaraja.

‘Is this the nearest road to the holy Santanu, Vaishyi?’

Shyly Diti stammers: ‘Lord, I am the widow ... I will call mother Kodini!’

‘Not necessary. Why should your answer not be enough for me?’

‘Lord, straight towards the amra-woods. Then ride towards the sun.’

Compassion for the frightened woman overcomes him. He wants to say something friendly, but just then, Kodini approaches.

‘Go away, you wretch! Do you dare to speak to the high Prince! I will punish her, Lord. She is my son’s widow.’

Kunala is deeply indignant. ‘Does she deserve to be punished for that?’

‘Because of previous lives, she caused the death of Yasa, Matali’s son.’

‘Could you also be guilty because of previous lives?’

Kodini is taken aback by the Prince’s remark and looks at him, offended.

‘Lord ... everyone believes that she ...’

‘And I believe that you are at fault. Who is right? Is she not a human just as you and I? Is she worse than you in this life?’ To the widow the Prince says, ‘Come, Diti! I thank you for your friendly help. See here, a bangle! Your late husband’s mother appears to unfairly keep you from wearing ornaments. Wear it as a reminder of your helpfulness to the Yuvaraja.’

Trembling, Diti bows her head into the dust of the road and raises herself up again, blushing, while accepting the bangle and sliding it quickly

onto her arm.

Kunala resumes his journey. Kodini stares after him speechlessly, her sharp tongue stilled by awe. But her heart is filled with hatred for him, he who treats a wretched creature like Diti with friendliness and dares to admonish a virtuous woman like herself, who has brought sons into the world.

Katcha, still sitting by the side of the road as Kunala rides by, does not move. The Prince's gaze slides over the brahmacharin. This vexes him. What does Manu's law say? Man is purer above the waist than below and the purest is the mouth. From the mouth of Brahma, a Brahmin is born. And because a Brahmin possesses the Vedas, he is by rights Lord of all creation. Which creature can surpass him through whose mouth the gods continually eat the offering meats and the forefathers the offerings for the dead? Of all created things, the living ones are the highest; of the living those bestowed with the gift of reason; of those, man; and of man, the Brahmins; and of the Brahmins, those who know the Vedas. Even the birth of a Brahmin is the eternal incarnation of the holy Law because he is born to fulfil the holy Law and become one with Brahman. All that exists in the world belongs to the Brahmins. The Brahmin eats merely his own food even though it is begged for; wears merely his own cloak even though it is asked for. Other mortals exist at the behest of the Brahmins. Thus he, Katcha, can simply take Kanchanamala! Later, when he becomes a grihaprastha! Is it not whispered among the Brahmins that the Maharajah is a Shudra?

Chandra is almost full and when the sun drops behind the tall trees of the mahavana, she tries to climb above it on the other side. Her light infuses a soft blue hue to the white of the bungalow and all traces of the summer heat, the dryness, the dusty drabness, the shrivelled flowers, dissolves in the darkness of the hushed night. The forest all around appears like a giant fairytale garden silhouetted against the gray heavens in which a few stars are beginning to twinkle here and there. It is as though a cooling calm has descended on the overheated tempers which had flared up in the heat of the day against the ever-oppressive rites. Mother Amba has placed in the centre of a small table a large bowl made of *plaksha*-wood. It holds fruit and rice cakes, baked in ghee, sweetened with honey and sugar. Amba passes the bowl to the Yuvaraja.

‘The gods will envy us, Mother Amba.’

‘In Santanu’s house, the gods are the first to receive their portion of what is prepared on Agni’s hallowed fire, O, Yuvaraja.’

‘Those who provide for the gods will be provided for,’ laughs Kancha.

‘And those who do not honour the gods will be ruined by them,’ Katcha adds gloomily to her words.

‘Here I miss the link, my Katcha.’

‘You, my Guru, need not understand the link.’

Santanu knows that Katcha’s words are meant for the Prince.

‘You have been taken into my family as a student, Katcha, and I wish to know what your words mean.’

Katcha turns awkwardly to his Guru. ‘It is better that you ask the Prince himself about his actions.’

‘The Prince? Are you the keeper of his karma?’

‘In the house of Brahmins the laws of the Brahmins apply,’ Katcha mumbles but Santanu hears him.

‘Explain what you mean, Katcha!’ he says sternly.

‘Lord, just as you are, so I am raised above other varnas.’

‘Your words border on insult: You are merely a brahmacharin, and the Yuvaraja belongs to the varna of the Kings, which is separate and above all other varnas. Speak!’

Kunala listens, smiling. He has already felt for some time that Katcha is not kindly disposed to him. Katcha’s unfriendly attitude, his refusal to greet him earlier that day, did not go unnoticed by the Prince. He is aware of the inclination of some Brahmins toward the Mauryas. Katcha’s attitude appears to him as being unreasonable, at the very least.

‘Prince Kunala treated the contemptible widow of Matali’s son like an honourable woman and gave a bracelet to her; she who may not wear ornaments.’

Santanu is briefly alarmed but the clear look in Kunala’s pure eyes reassures him.

‘Has Diti been unfaithful to her dead husband, is she not chaste, does she not have control over her thoughts, words, deeds? Answer, Katcha!’

‘I do not know, my Guru. But she is a widow; she has by her wrongdoings in previous births caused the death of Matali’s son and thus should perform grave atonement by severe fasting, low menial work, and

taking off any ornaments. She should have perished along with her husband.'

'Which guru has taught Katcha that? The Law of Manu says: 'A pious wife, who wishes to keep on living after her husband's death, must not do anything that would displease him.' Did Matali's son ever demand such severe penance of her? Manu says: 'A virtuous wife, who remains chaste after her husband's death, reaches heaven even though she has no sons.' And further: 'She who controls her thoughts, words and deeds and never betrays her honour, will live after her death in heaven with her husband and will be called a virtuous woman. And more: 'Adornments that were worn by the woman while her husband was alive may never be taken away from her or divided by his heirs, under banishment from their varna.' Again: 'Manu punishes the one who lives a licentious life after the death of her husband.' Does Katcha wish to be wiser than Manu? Or, does Katcha want to follow in the footsteps of a family who, by virtue of their lack of education, mistreats a vulnerable woman? Or, does Katcha, who himself is still a brahmacharin, mean that he is ready to assume priestly status by preaching about penance? Or, does Katcha have another intention for this charge? Katcha does not know if Diti has done anything to dishonour her husband's memory; he merely knows that she is a contemptible widow. Walk in Brahman, Katcha; that is of importance for your duties of begging, rituals and studies, for your austerity, your battle against slander, and above all: for the control of your senses. One's own faults alone are of importance, so learn yet to be a Brahmin.'

'Yes, Father.' Katcha bows his head but his heart is still filled with resentment.

'Come, my child.'

'Yes, Father.' Both stand up. And all see how Santanu walks with his tall, adult pupil across the grounds, bathed in Chandra's silvery light. The trees stand like worshippers before the radiant light-god; the stillness of the night becomes deeper with the sounds of the mahavana. All silently follow the guru and his pupil with their eyes, the reprimand to Katcha having made its impression. They see how both sit on a rough bench at the path to the Bhagavati.

'What do you have to say to me, Katcha?'

Katcha lets his gaze range over the darkness of the woods on which the moon splashes strange shapes of light, like demons who listen to what he

will say, and they oppress him because within him lacks the peace of a pure conscience. He pulls himself up.

‘Lord, Kama whispered into my heart an irresistible love for Kanchanamala. Give her to me as my wife after my *samavartama*².’

Santanu looks at him, alarmed.

‘You dare to ask me, when you are nearing the end of your studies, to condone such a great sin! You should not touch a woman nor even look at her!’

‘I would not dare to, my father, before I am grihaprastha. But I am so tormented by my love that I forget my duties. If I were to be certain that you intend her to be my wife, I could fulfil them.’ Katcha sinks to the feet of his guru holding them as a sign of his highest reverence.

‘You do not understand anything of your noble calling! Have I not told you again and again that your task, difficult though it may be, is to dedicate yourself to fulfil the duties that all brahmacharins take upon them. And then, I, as your guru, should now abet you in forsaking the most important obligation of all, namely, control of your senses! You should not expect that of me, Katcha. It would make you the greatest sinner and lead me to perdition. I taught you, if you wish to attain Brahman and penetrate through the maya of the world then practise tapas, asceticism. It is Brahman that elevates itself above each individual and *tapas* is the way of renunciation of the individual and the realisation of the Brahman in the twice-born. You do wish to realise the supreme divinity in the human being, do you not? To penetrate the truth by absorbing the Brahman through the Vedas, and to follow the precepts of the brahmacharin? That means, too: abstaining from all contacts, neither looking nor touching a woman. The brahmacharin is devoted to Brahman, the Atman; he is in a sense himself the Brahman which is enclosed within him, in his divine self, his soul. That is what you have to elevate in yourself because you are a brahmacharin.

*‘The brahmacharin carries the Brahman, shining,
In him all gods are entwined’.*³

And now you ask me, Katcha, to permit you to abandon your highest duty, that which makes you a brahmacharin!’

‘Why then, is there this overpowering love in me, my father?’

‘If the brahmacharin did not have the senses and longings of emotions in his being, why should he still have to be a brahmacharin, my son? Then he would already be superhuman, godly, the Brahman. Do you think your life should be without struggle without overcoming that which makes you human, without tapas? Kanchanamala does not exist for you to quiet your longings, but to test you, to overcome your human self. So, do penance for your shortcomings by renouncing her. Now come along, my son.’

‘Yes, holy Father.’ Once again they join the others. Santanu does not reveal to them how much Katcha’s wretched love hurts him. How will he give him the strength against the pull of nature from within? Katcha’s unfriendly attitude towards his noble guest displeases him. Can he not bring them together at least in mutual appreciation?



KAMA AS THE FIRST SEED OF THE SPIRIT

The rainy season has started. Dark banks of clouds loom over the plains of the Ganga and are slowly forming a canopy over the pastures. Now there are storms, then no winds, followed by bolts of lightning, and the booming crashes of thunder followed one another in rapid succession. Floods of waters pour down towards the thirsty woods. All entrances to the house are sealed with muslin screens to stop flying ants, beetles, and mosquitoes. The inmates of the house, enveloped in darkness for days on end, have all the time in their hands to contemplate and reflect. The water gushes forth. It thunders on the roof, splashes on the ground, ruffles through the crowns of palms and banyans, fizzing and foaming through the streams that flood towards the Bhagavati. Only Katcha braves the elements as rain drips off his bronzed limbs, cooling off his inner fire. During the dry season, he managed to stock wood for the sacred fire but for his meals he sets off to the village, to Kodini, who has fathomed his hatred for the Prince. Santanu believes that Katcha has gained insight, consequently regretting his sin and now is spending his time fervently fulfilling his duties, practising tapas.

In the evening Santanu's family sits together in the room where the sacred fire is burning. The ponderous darkness outside and the muslin

screens make the air heavy and oppressive.

Kunala and Santanu settle on seats, Amba and Kanchanamala move to the rear on a bench, the brahmacharins cross-legged on the floor, all in a circle around the guru. Santanu, with his right hand, is stroking the top of his head as though seeking a topic that would interest all and perhaps improve the relationship between his student and the Yuvaraja.

‘Katcha, would you recite the ‘Hymn of Creation’¹ for the Prince?’

Katcha is jostled out of his vengeful thoughts but cannot find the inner peace needed to recite such sacred poetry.

‘Forgive me, Father, I would be sinning by reciting the sacred hymn now.’ Santanu looks at him for a long time. Does he refuse because Kunala is present? As the oldest student he was always keen to show off his knowledge of the Vedas. Or, is it because he is afraid that he will not be able to recite the hymn flawlessly, which would be regarded as sin?

‘Vyasa?’ Vyasa is the next in age. He stands up and assumes a posture of reverence, apt for such a solemn duty. ‘First, give us my elucidation, Vyasa.’

‘The Song of Creation is the loftiest hymn from the *Rig Veda*, high Yuvaraja, and of a wondrously beautiful composition. There are seven stanzas of four quartets each. In the first four, the first two lines express what was not there, and subsequently, in the next, what nevertheless is there. And more and more, the holy rishi inquires deeply into the unfathomable: the encased primal creature, as breathing, as living, then as a germinating seed in a shell, and finally, emancipating itself as the kama. Then, as though recoiling, he comes down to the sixth stanza, where he wavers away the significance of the gods with one single line, and draws near in hesitancy in the last line.

And Vyasa recites the verses, slowly, correctly, in a pure tone:

‘Aum...

Once upon a time there was neither existence nor non-existence;

There was neither the realm of space, nor the heavens above...

*What was it that enveloped all of this? In whose womb was
it concealed?*

Where were the waters of the ocean, the depths of the abyss?

No death existed, nor immortality.

*There was neither night nor the glow of day...
And the One breathed windless, through its self,
For none other beyond him lay hidden within the All.*

*Darkness reigned; in the beginning the world was
A lightless wave, lost in the black of night...
The 'One', life enclosed in a broad shell
Out of heated force, through self-chastisement, became born².*

*Then came forth from him, in the beginning of time, Kama³,
Which, as the first seed of the spirit came into being...
The roots of 'being' out of non-existence were, so said
Wise men, keenly attuned in the heart's ground⁴.*

*Across the breadth of space, a dividing line was spread⁵:
Was it⁶ below or somewhere above? Where?
Seminal powers were there and mighty forces unfolding
Below was potential, above energy.*

*And yet, those who know, wish to proclaim,
When once creation had become, from whence it came forth!
The gods did not become until after the creation of the world.
Thus, who can know from what they sprung!*

*He, from whom in the beginning creation was brought forth,
He, who as Overlord looks over it from the highest heavenly light,
May be the One, that created it, or not created it,
That One knows... Or, does he not know either?*

Vyasa takes his seat again beside Katcha. All are silent. It is the first time that Kunala has heard the hymn, and being innately poetic himself, he is struck by the lofty flight of ideas and the beauty of composition. Still, much was obscure to him.

‘Kama, as the first seed of the spirit ... holy Santanu?’

Santanu smiles, sensing Ashoka in this query.

‘You have just pointed out the most difficult and most debated stanza, high Yuvaraja. Here, Kama does not mean love in the usual sense, but

trishna, a thirst, longing, an urge, the will towards life. The probable meaning is that Kama, being the non-sentient will, is the origin of *manas*, the mind-spirit.'

'Has creation then become?'

'Not according to Buddhist beliefs, high Prince. That acknowledges no creation. All that comes into being, perishes, according to Buddha. And that means that he acknowledges no Atman, no primordial being. For us the world is transitory, fleeting, but not the Atman or Brahman, there it is abiding. But what is the ever life-creating principle for the Buddhist? Is it that 'nothing'? Or, out of 'nothingness'? Is the 'nothingness' then the principle of all the beauty around you? Is all the feeling, understanding, living, joy, the experience of continuity in our feelings and existence then: out of 'nothing'? How do you then know that I, and that you, exist, think or feel? Is there not an eternal connection between all beings, all things, perhaps? Do we live in the many incarnations for that 'nothingness'? A life, founded on 'nothingness', cannot be but construed as suffering!'

'The Buddha recognised the unborn, the as-yet-uncreated, as the foundation for what is born and becomes. And is 'to live' suffering? It is often joyful to me!' Inadvertently, his gaze turns to Kanchanamala who looks away, blushing. This does not go unnoticed by Katcha and anger is aroused in his heart. 'My Father, the Maharajah, wants to remove suffering as much as possible for all creatures, and so do I.'

'But suffering brought on by Kama can only be obliterated if man tears out its root, Kama, the selfishness. The Buddha teaches about the triviality of existence; Nirvana is the breaking free of suffering, but not a clearly defined blissfulness, since with that a selfish chase for that blissfulness will arise. And his great goal was clearly the dissolution of selfishness.'

Katcha, who experiences the discussion of Buddhist tenets as unpleasant, suddenly joins the discussion:

'Is Kama not the god of love? And if the creator, Prajapati, brought forth Kama as the seed of his spirit, why is doubt again expressed in the last verse, holy Father? That sounds like a broken gantha in a Buddhist monastery,' he adds scornfully.

'Consider, my son, that love, the kind you mean, is merely a small trifling part of the greater meaning, Kama.'

‘Trifling part, even while it prevents a man from fulfilling his highest duties ...!’

‘Yes. What could it mean when it is but the revelation of one side of Kama! Kama is an edict of Nature, the non-reasoning, brutish urge to live, the sum of all forces in nature, in all beings. It reveals itself as the eternal *trishna*, a thirst, a desire, a craving for lust, joy, becoming, procreating, a reaching for everything that we, instinctively, think we need. In the malicious man, it becomes a lust for power. It develops itself into a delusion, sometimes benign, sometimes criminal, a pursuit of happiness, of love, but also an insatiable will. This Will of Nature, urge for life, goes on, brutish, whether it brings joy or hurt; it does not know compassion. Every individual attempts to make happiness last longer, and employs the same means as this Will: non-sentient selfishness and ruthlessness in its sacrificing of others. Each of us is part of this Will, and so, by his birth, an accomplice of the evil and suffering which is the consequence of this non-sentient, brutish instinct for life.’

‘Diti!’ whispers Kancha, inclining her head towards her father.

‘We abandon our duty in order to satisfy our lusts.’ Santanu sees how Kancha cast an uneasy glance his way. ‘We kill to get what the thirst for life whispers to us. And we live in the delusion that we do what we ought to do; we even dare to view that cruelty of this Will as natural and reasonable. Our culpability is that we participate in it. That is the terrible delusion that envelops the world and that eternally propels beings from one birth to another. From this delusion, we ought to free ourselves!’

‘Is Prajapati then not the Creator of the world, holy father?’

‘The gods were not created till the world was created, Kancha,’ smiles Santanu. ‘The world-creator is the world-creating Will, which is the origin of all existence and by that premise, of all suffering, sin and death. It is the primeval base, the Atman. He who has seen through this knows that our world is maya.’

‘But, holy Santanu, those who contemplate the Vedanta and come to its full awareness can ascend to Nirvana or the Atman, Brahman.’

Santanu nods warmly to the young Prince. ‘Certainly, by taking in the Brahman, in the form of the Vedas as a brahmacharin, practising them as grihastha, contemplating them as vanaprastha and subsequently as a sannyasin, uniting with the Atman ...’

‘But that would mean that only the twice-born can be released!’

‘Apparently,’ says Santanu. And Katcha’s Brahminical pride heaves.

‘So, not the millions of Shudras and Chandalas nor those who live outside India.’

Kanchanamala’s expression seems to quiver in the flickering light of the sacred fire. In great suspense she looks at her father. Her soul goes out to the stranger as she feels in him the compassionate spirit of the holy Maharajah that permeates throughout the entire empire. And she knows that Kunala cannot share this opinion of her father.

‘No, not until they are reborn as Aryans,’ remarks Katcha.

‘So only in Aryavarta, Katcha? The world, the welfare, the liberation, the Atman is only for a privileged group? Is not for every true human being the first step, the recognition of the human spirit, of the maya, of this Will of nature? And is not the next step the struggle to overcome its ruthlessness, the subjugation of the evil and the brute? And then finally, the momentous and paramount, holy Santanu, the nurturing in every being of good in defiance of evil, of righteousness instead of injustice? The victory over the delusion of desire! Is that not the free will that is created in us by a higher principle than that brute Will?’

‘How can man detach that higher principle from that Will of nature? They are according to Brahmanism one and the same,’ opines Katcha.

‘Katcha is right insofar that what we see as trishna, as an urge for life, as an insatiable Will everywhere in nature, ultimately is the very basis for our existence.’

‘But above that is Love, the way the Buddha taught, which impels the confrontation with the brute and injustice in the world. Is it not that, holy Santanu, which is more powerful than trishna, because it is the most noble, the divine within man?’

It is as though something in Kanchanamala is becoming aware of what till then lived unknown within her. Her bright eyes settled understandingly on the Prince.

‘Why is the Maharajah a Buddhist, high Prince?’ she asks.

‘Because the Tathagata comes closest to expressing the *sara*, the essence of all religions, in its purest form; because he asks of all mankind for a change of the inner view towards all their fellow creatures, for loving

kindness and compassion for all who suffer. That is what the Buddha wants.'

'Such beautiful teachings and such a noble pursuit of the Maharajah!' says Kancha.

'Is that not heresy for a Brahmin, father?' asks Katcha, outwardly calm, but in his heart seething with anger towards the Shudra.

'He alone is a Brahmin who, by purity in thoughts, words and deeds, has liberated himself from all evil, and who, through his compassion and understanding, strives towards the sacred and divine,' says Santanu quietly. Katcha, embarrassed, keeps silent.

'Is trishna bound to nature, holy Santanu?'

'Not long ago, nature was dead but the salutary nectar of heaven flows over the earth, and look now how powerful, after the rains, nature's Will is at work!

Now, make ready for the evening oblations.'



TRISHNA

Indra's Bow¹ adorns the heavens and rarely yet does he shoot his bolts of lightning and arrows of rain through the air. Nature, rising from its deep sleep, invigorated and rejuvenated, fills the pure air with its fresh and sweet fragrances. Ushas colours the retreating clouds with a sultry glow. They are like an immense herd of elephants marching off to battle with banners of lightning and drumbeats of thunder. When Surya's rays break through the wreckage, the occupants of the house hurry out onto the grounds.

The Yuvaraja looks around in amazement. He can hardly recognise the surroundings as all around, the green of newborn life is bursting open, flowers blooming from countless buds. In the pond, the first red lotus blossoms are unfurling their fiery rosettes in full splendour; the creepers whose arms reach yearningly in every direction throughout the wood have now been transformed into laughing garlands of large delicate blossoms. The *bakula* trees with their fragrant flowers imbue their aromas; *kovidaras*² show off their purple finery, luring thousands of bees, butterflies and others in search of the rich honey. It is amidst such a profusion of new-sprung life that Kunala stands in awe, admiring its splendour for some time. Finally, he bursts out:

‘Where is this overwhelming beauty coming from, Kanchanamala?’

‘Kama, as the first seed of the spirit, trishna!’ she says to him with a laugh.

‘Let us go through the jungle to the Bhagavati!’

‘The jungle is dangerous now, O, Prince.’

‘Dangerous...?’

‘Coming from the capital you do not, like we do, know the tormentors of the mahavana. All that crawls, leaps, slithers and nips, stings and gnaws, and all that wings and flutters, buzzing through the air. Do you see how everywhere shoots of grass are bursting out of the sandy ground and paths? There, the cobras and black scorpions like to go. The fasting in the torrid spell has made all animals of the forest hungry.’

She laughs, and her teeth—white as the flowering jasmine— sparkle between her lips, red as the *bandhujiva*-blossom. ‘Do you not fear the leeches that latch on to your arms and legs to quench their thirst without regard for your suffering?’

Kunala laughs. Kanchanamala snatches a freshly opened soft-blue lily and puts it in her hair, and a blooming ashoka flower above her partly uncovered bosom. She sees his beautiful eyes shine, his cheeks glowing in the clearing sunlight, and she laughs, unaware that her charm is touching the Prince even more, while causing hurt to Katcha. All this emerging life embraces their trembling hearts.

‘I shall warn the guards and go alone.’

‘No, I shall go with you. You do not know the mahavana.’

‘Do not expose yourself to danger, Kanchanamala!’

‘You should not go alone.’ She blushes at his gaze.

‘I shall have Vida harnessed.’ Kanchana’s eyes twinkle.

‘We will take a mongoose along, O, Prince,’ and she opens a cage from which the tame animal appears. On its short legs, with its long body, it shuffles quickly, close to the earth, sniffing the earth, grunting and whistling, happy with its newfound freedom.

Kunala carefully helps Kanchana mount the elephant and seats himself next to her. Two guards lead the way to the river; two others follow, carefully inspecting the area. The mongoose has gone ahead but returns obediently when Kanchanamala calls out to him, only to later creep past the elephant again. They then hear a soft hissing!

‘That is the first one,’ whispers Kanchanamala. ‘A cobra!’

The Prince stops the elephant. In his excitement, he clutches Kanchana's arm. She blushes. They see the mongoose standing still on the path. With a hiss, the snake brings its head up. Its neck is swollen menacingly; a strange play of attack and retreat has begun on both sides. It is as though the heads of both animals are somehow bound together with an invisible string. They move, one forward and the other retreating, following each other, quick as lightning, almost simultaneous, until the cobra, in one brief moment, retreats too late and the mongoose lunges fiercely for a bite, killing it and partaking of his meal.

'Trishna,' whispers Kanchanamala to the Prince. She looks around, pointing to a huge and beautiful butterfly amongst the red-and-white floral splendour that flutters from flower to flower, itself a flower with its wealth of colours, now frolicking in the air and then resting on a beautiful flower. A jubilant *bul-bul*³, his voice, clear as a bell, trilling through the woods, flies towards the frail body and devours it, then shoots off, looking for a new catch. And the large sparkling, glowing wings of the butterfly flutter to the ground ...

'Trishna!'

They approach the fully flooded Bhagavati, which, with its broader waves, hastens even more quickly towards the Ganga. A herd of deer romps in the tender grass on the broad bank, guarded by a male with large antlers. When another buck approaches from above, he bellows a snort and turns towards the rival while stamping his slender but strong hooves. The newcomer vigorously leaps forward, straining his neck and legs. Both immediately begin their fight for the brides, who are huddled together uneasily. It is a battle of life and death. When the intruder has finished off the guardian of the herd with one last fierce butt, he bellows his victory cry through the woods and approaches the huddled roes. *His roes!*

'Trishna!'

The Prince is crestfallen. 'How perplexing, this struggle for existence.'

'That is precisely what father meant, high Yuvaraja, each appears to be impassioned by one overriding thought: I want to live and I will stand my ground even if it is at the expense of another. It is the eternal struggle of all against all, even amongst people.'

'You only see one side of life, honourable Kanchanamala. The Buddha has shown the way out of this compulsion: an all-encompassing compassion

for people and animals that suffer. He showed each person the way to change from perpetual struggle to compassion and goodness; taking on the burdens of all, by all. Dharma as opposed to trishna.'

'Removing trishna from the mahavana! Demanding love for the poor Diti! Take away the loveless ideas, even from Katcha!'

'Father's edicts are directed at Brahmin and Chandala alike. It is toilsome work, that of my Father's and of his successors.'

'And do you think to rule the world with compassion? Turn away hate with love? Tame savage mountain tribes with manas?'

'Kanchana, you kindle my objections to my father's principles, my doubts, that often quell me. I still lack his belief in humankind as well as his strength!'

'Your father must have a steadfast faith in his work, that he devotes himself to such a beautiful task. He, who wavers between two thoughts, has lost his power, O, Prince. The holy Maharajah has sworn off war. You may regard it as still necessary in some situations.'

Kunala stares at her, speechless. It is precisely this wavering that perturbs his life. He clutches her hand. 'Father's power is supported by the Agramahisi, who has always been his pillar with her greatness of heart.'

'How fortunate for the holy Maharajah!'

'But I also need support in my life, Kancha, a wife whom I love and who loves me, so much that we ascend into one in knowing, one in aspiration, one in will. Kancha ... Will you be that one?'

Kanchana softly pulls her hand from his.

'I know nothing and want nothing, O, Yuvaraja,' she replies shyly. 'I am merely a child of the mahavana and the Bhagavati, nothing more.'

'So was Mother Asandhi! You will be my Maharani, Kancha! My agramahisi!'

Kanchanamala stares at the blossoming jungle: 'A flowering climber seeking its support on the mighty kings of the wood.'

'Creepers link the trees into a mahavana, to unity, the jungle.'

She looks into his soft, now deeply glowing eyes, and gives him a smile. Suddenly, he wraps his arm around her and draws her to him. Blushing, she expresses her objection:

'You would take a mahavana-plant to a city park, O, Yuvaraja.'

'A beautiful, proud flower from the mahavana, Kancha!'

‘That will wither!’

‘I want to cultivate her and take care of her so that she will grow and flower, so that her fragrance and colour will bring joy over India, just as the kovidara-tree does over the heaven, Kancha.’

She looks at him earnestly. Does she have any idea of the difficult task that will await her? A king’s son who clings to his powerful father, perhaps later, even onto her? Will she be able to mean something to him in his inward struggle? Or, will she wither away in the anthapura of a powerful ruler? He is serious, well-intentioned, true. Were it not better for him if he had some of the light-heartedness and boldness, of the wild Kshatriya-lover, who does not ask but takes, the cruelty of the mighty master, who wills and subjects all to his will? No, no! India must flower, and she wants to blossom for him and India. A sweet smile radiates towards him. She wants to kneel before the future, sacred Maharajah, but he takes her in his arms, kisses her ardently, and once again places her close against him.

‘You will be my Maharani, Kancha, my Agrahamisi!’

‘Look, my Prince! Over there ... that restlessness in the deer herd!’

They see how a powerful leopard, springing from one of the heavy branches, pounces on a young buck and with the little animal in his jaws, drags it into the mahavana. The deer family takes flight behind the earlier conqueror. Kanchanamala jumps up, and so does the Prince.

‘The Will of nature, existence at the expense of another! Why do Brahmins despise other people, the Aryans the Shudras? Why all this hatred and envy?’

‘It lingers on from long ago, Kancha. My father supports through his power those who proclaim the teachings of love of the Tathagata. And the whole of India blesses the righteous Maharajah, who, for the most miserable human beings, too, softens the pain and brings prosperity and happiness. That is how I too want to be one day, Kancha, with your help.’

‘It is said that the Brahmins hate him.’

‘Sayana, Kullika, Khallataka, his greatest friends, were Brahmins.’

‘And who is your greatest friend, my Yuvaraja?’

Kunala sinks deeply in thought then proclaims: ‘My father!’ He then halts the elephant by a yonesia, a waterfall, under the luxuriant cover of a radiant, orange-flame tree.

‘See, Kancha, I will adorn you with the blossom of this *Ashoka*- tree.’

‘Ashoka-tree, by day a pleasure because of its beauty, by night because of its glorious fragrance...’

‘You and I, Kancha, we will be happy in the happiness of all!’

It is a festive entry on the premises of the house: Kancha seated in the howda that is decorated with red blossoms, atop the imperial elephant. When both young people have climbed down, the Prince takes her hand and leads her to Santanu and Amba.

‘Holy Santanu and mother Amba, make us happy and give Kancha to me as my bride!’

‘It gives us nothing but pleasure, high Yuvaraja, that you esteem Kancha to be worthy of being the Rani of the future ruler of India. May she give you sons! We shall be as happy as the mahavana in *Asvina*⁴ if she makes you happy so that you may be a blessing for the peoples.’

The others express their respect and good wishes to the young couple. Not Katcha, who has suddenly disappeared. He storms away along the jungle path to the village, beside himself. His hatred and rage seek an outlet. He knows but one who can comfort him: Kodini.

When he enters Matali’s house, she quickly notices that something is seriously wrong. She shows him the respected seat reserved for Brahmins.

‘Tell me, Katcha, what brings you to Matali’s home so upset?’

‘Kodini, I am like India without rain ... the sun without light, or the tree without roots!’

‘I do not understand you, Katcha.’

‘He has robbed me of that which is as indispensable to me as the Veda is to the priest, Kodini.’ A sob wells up in his heart, but he suppresses it, not wanting to show his pain and weakness to this woman.

‘Who, what, Katcha?’

‘He, you know who, has stolen my Kanchanamala!’

‘The Prince?’ Katcha lowers his head. ‘That Shudra! And you tolerate that, a Brahmin? Diti, bring drinking water!’

Diti returns with a cup and a pitcher of water.

‘Go away!’ Diti is told, and the young widow hurries out of the room.

‘Here, drink, holy Brahmin!’

‘I am brahmacharin, Kodini! That is exactly my misfortune!’

‘And what do you want now?’

‘Kodini, you are a woman. Your cunning is sharper than mine!’

‘Kill that sinner! Have him killed!’... she whispers to him, her words full of hate. Katcha shrugs his shoulders.

‘He is heavily guarded, Kodini! And a Brahmin does not kill.’

When Matali comes in, she tells him what has happened.

‘How does this concern you? The brahmacharin has to accept whatever the holy Santanu approves of!’

‘A Shudra!’

‘Shame on you, Kodini! He is of the varna of the rulers. Prince Kunala will be Maharajah one day, Kanchanamala the Maharani. You want to prevent that? Accept your fate, Katcha. Your father will provide you another woman.’

Matali goes to his rice fields. He does not want to anger the gods now that the harvest is flourishing. Why does Kodini involve herself in Katcha’s affairs! Katcha is sitting, bent over, in the Brahmin-seat. Kodini comes to him.

‘Hunters are despicable creatures, Katcha!’ she whispers, hissing an evil plan into his ear.

Katcha shakes his head. ‘But the armed guards!’

‘Kawi, the head of the hunters! Go to him!’

‘I, a Brahmin, should go to a cursed hunters-camp!’

‘Diti will go and fetch him!’

Thoughts storm wildly through Katcha’s head. He knows that he will incur a great sin, a self-willed brahmacharin, who acts against the laws of his varna and goes against his master! But his hate is stronger than the teachings and his as yet unripened wisdom.

‘What is your plan, Kodini?’

‘Hunters have no conscience, they are outcasts. Kawi will help you! Furthermore, whatever he does, he will be responsible for it.’

Still the brahmacharin hesitates, but his vengeful heart wins out over caution. Besides there are means to do penance for his sins. And is not Kodini, merely a woman, the one responsible for the consequences?

‘He must help you. I shall send Diti. Diti, Diti!’ When Diti enters the room, she is commanded: ‘Go to Kawi the hunter and tell him a Brahmin here wants to speak to him.’

Diti turns pale and is barely able to respond: 'Mother, I dare not go to the hunter's camp!'

'But you dared to plunge my son into misfortune, widow! Go!'

Diti breaks out in sobs. 'I'm afraid! Those sinners!'

'Are they greater sinners than you, who are doing penance for your former sins?'

'An Aryan woman will not risk going there!'

'What were you in your previous birth? Worse than a hunter! Go!'

Diti kneels before Katcha and bows her head to the ground.

'Holy Brahmin, do say that it is not allowed! I dare not go to that camp, Lord! I do not want to sin! I cannot do this.'

'Go away, widow. I have nothing to do with you!' shouts Katcha indignantly. 'I am a brahmacharin, and not the caretaker of your karma. You are to obey!' Katcha turns away.

'I have no son to defend me, lord. Help me against mother Kodini!' But Katcha is listening no longer.

'Right!' screams Kodini. 'For your sins the gods are punishing you!'

'I am always obedient but you may not do this, mother Kodini!'

'I order you, I, your husband's mother!' She picks up a stick. Diti does not dare to refuse any longer, and she does not dare to go to the hunter's camp either. Helplessly, she looks at the brahmacharin who does not even give her a glance. Weeping, she then walks out of the door. She begins walking in desperation towards the hunters' camp. She, going to those outcasts! But what can she do, flee? Where to? To her parents? They will only chase her back to Matali's house! To Santanu or the sacrificial priests? Who will not even speak to her, a poor wretch. Let Varuna send a cobra on her path! She will offer him her foot! She walks barefoot through the grass but no cobra appears to bite poison into her blood. The closer she is to the camp, the more frightened she becomes. She hears the hunters' yelling and cursing, and she backs away in alarm. But neither does she dare to return. Sobbing, she falls down on a grassy bank. Jaivali, a Vaishya, walks by her and hears her cry. Cautious, he wants to walk on but Diti believes that the gods have sent Jaivali on her path. Happily she walks towards him, whereupon Jaivali backs a few paces.

'Jaivali, go for me to Kawi and tell him that he must come to the brahmacharin Katcha, who is waiting for him at Kodini's house.'

‘Go yourself, widow!’ Desperately, Diti tries to persist. ‘Here, you may have this gold bracelet!’

‘The bracelet of a widow would bring misfortune to my family!’ And Jaivali continues on his way. Trembling, Diti now walks the path to the camp. A few hunters are playing dice in front of one of the leaf-thatched huts, laughing and swearing loudly. They see Diti and jump up.

‘Come here, sweetheart. Are you coming for me?’ A young fellow walks towards her, and embraces her, but Diti decides to strike out vehemently.

‘Come, come, not so angry, dear!’

‘Over here, darling!’ shouts another.

‘Where is Kawi?’ She is trembling so badly that she could barely remain standing.

‘Kawi only likes sprightly young girls! A widow would not tempt him!’ A hunter grabs her around the waist. Diti turns around and scratches him in the face, so that he would let go.

‘It’s a tiger! Such resistance!’ One foul utterance follows another. Finally, Kawi steps out of his hut, yawning.

‘What is the problem, darling?’

‘A Brahmin wishes to speak to you at Matali’s house. As soon as possible!’

‘Something to be earned?’

‘I do not know.’ She wants to slip away from the brutish gang now that she has given them the message. Everyone knows, however, that a widow has no protection in an Aryan village. The young hunter grabs her and drags her away to his hut, laughing, and Diti weeps, weakened by the many fasts forced upon her at home, she cannot fight any longer. Another has quickly pulled off her costly bracelet.

‘Which widow dares to adorn herself with such baubles!’ he mocks her.

Kawi leaves for the village without worrying about the unlucky woman. Every Aryan avoids her and children run away from her. What concern is that of his? When he enters Kodini’s house, no seat is offered to him and none is expected.

‘You have a little matter you wanted me to clear up, Kodini?’

‘Yes, this Brahmin. The holy Santanu has promised his daughter to a stranger and this Brahmin wants the girl as his wife. Can you help?’

‘The imperial Prince?’

‘Yes.’

Kawi burst out in brutal laughter. ‘Do you think that I will invite the soldiers of the Maharajah into my camp? Is that all? Is there nothing else?’ He gets ready to leave. ‘Do not send an unprotected woman into our camp for such folly!’

‘A widow!’

‘You, too, will soon be a widow when Matali allows such things in his house! I just heard the raven scratching on his roof!’

‘You ... merely ... have to prevent that marriage,’ stutters Kodini.

‘Look for cobras, Kodini, or lure a wild tiger or a herd of elephants to Santanu’s house!’ mocks the hunter.

‘You do that, Kawi!’ she snaps at him. And she points to Katcha who looks as though this is not his affair.

‘How much can we earn, young brahmacharin?’

Katcha is fuming at the way the hunter dares to address him and points to Kodini. ‘Speak to her.’ He turns his back to him lest a varna-less brute taint him! Kodini further negotiates.

Long after Kawi has left, Diti returns. She has straightened her clothing as best as she could.

‘Look at you! Did you like the camp so well?’ hisses Kodini.

Diti looks at her with such reproach that Kodini feels insulted.

‘Look ahead and do your work!’

Slowly, Diti turns around to leave. She had fought with herself about whether she should return to Matali’s house, but the jungle frightened her so badly that she did not dare to enter it. She wants to speak to the Yuvaraja, tell him of her travails because they robbed her not only of her chastity but also of the bracelet which she has received from him. So often has she heard that anyone who has been treated unjustly could turn to the Holy Maharajah and justice would be done. The son of the Maharajah has been so kind to her.



THE YOUNG JUDGE

Would the Yuvaraja be like Maharajah Ashoka who does not tolerate injustice in his empire? Should she accept the theft, and the shame? While Matali works in the rice fields and Kodini is visiting a friend, Diti walks to the house of the holy Santanu. She looks nervously around her. She starts at every noise. Out of breath, she arrives at Santanu's grounds. There she is stopped by one of the imperial guards.

‘What do you want, woman?’

‘I would like to speak to the Yuvaraja.’

‘The Yuvaraja?’

Diti nods yes.

After Kunala has given permission, the guard leads her to his lord.

Diti kneels down and bows in the soft sand.

‘Stand up, Diti, and tell me what you want.’

Hesitatingly at first, but after the Prince smiles encouragingly and speaks kindly to her, she begins her story.

Appalled, Kunala puts questions, seeking more details about what had happened to her.

‘I shall investigate into the affair immediately, Diti. Be assured.’

‘Thank you, gracious Raja.’ She bows once again.

‘Just one more question, Diti. What did Katcha want with Kawi?’

‘Mother Kodini sent me, Lord. That is all I know.’

‘Go and wait.’ Diti hurries back to Tirha.

Kunala immediately sends for Kappa and once he has informed him, goes himself by elephant—accompanied by his full guard—to the hunters’ encampment. When they near, the loud noise of the gambling gamesters is suddenly hushed. One of the hunters tries to escape.

‘Grab him, Kappa!’

Two guards grab the fleeing man and take him to the Prince. It is the young hunter!

‘You have raped a young woman!’

‘We all took part, high Prince.’

‘You have violated the honour of a young woman, a subject of the holy Maharajah!’ The hunter remains silent.

‘Tie him to one of the horses, Kappa, and send him to Pataliputra. Who stole the bracelet?’

Not one of them replies. They know the punishment: chopping off of the hand that committed the act of stealing. Kunala’s voice is raised in his indignation at the cowardly act and his compassion for the poor widow.

‘Bring it to me!’ No one moves. Behind that slim, regal figure of the Prince lies a power so threatening that it causes them to tremble.

‘Speak or I will punish the whole camp. And not lightly!’ The wrath of the Mauryas is displayed through his voice and gestures. The eyes of a few hunters flicker, hardly perceptible, towards the thief. Kunala spots the movement and his sharp gaze transfixes on the thief.

‘Come here, you!’

Trembling, the thief approaches; all spears are suddenly pointed at him.

‘You have stolen the bracelet!’

The accused thief lowers his head.

‘Coward! Go and get it!’ Two guards are sent along. When they return, the hunter hands the bracelet to him.

‘You will return it yourself! Chase him ahead, before you! And you, Kawi, make certain that you do not cross my path again!’

Kunala signals the troops to leave the camp. They halt when they reach Matali’s house. Kodini and Matali hurry to meet them and give the Yuvaraja

a deep bow.

‘You sent your son’s wife to the hunters’ camp!’

Matali looks up, surprised. Kodini remains lying bent over.

‘Do you know what happened there? Call Diti!’ When Diti arrives, she is visibly trembling.

‘Now, you!’ The thief throws himself down in the dust and hands over to her the bangle he had stolen. ‘Get a block, Matali.’ One of the guards is told: ‘And you, unsheath your sword. Diti decides which hand will be taken from him.’

‘Lord, I shall do penance my entire life, Lord! Do not punish me like this, have pity, Lord,’ the hunter whimpers.

‘Pity? Did you have any pity for this poor woman?’

‘Lord, she is a widow! She was sent to our camp, Lord!’

‘My father does not consider anyone as a widow, only as subjects! Decide, Diti!’

Diti bursts out in tears. ‘No punishment because of me, noble Raja!’

‘You see, the widow is more compassionate than you. Return and forever stay away from the punishing hand of the Maharajah!’

The thief throws himself in the dust before the Prince then stands up and flees, to the great delight of the gathering villagers.

‘And you, Kodini? The care of your daughter-in-law, who is without any protection, rests on you! Remember this: the Maharajah demands that every human being be esteemed and treated as a human being!’

Kodini keeps silent.

Matali strikes her on the back. ‘Answer!’

‘Yes, Lord!’

The Prince makes a sign to proceed. All bow in reverence. The citizens of Tirha feel that a mighty hand had interceded at that moment. When Matali leaves the house to tend to his courtyard, Kodini calls her daughter-in-law. The golden bangle adorns her arm once again.

‘Come here!’ She slaps the young woman’s face and commands: ‘Go!’

Diti silently leaves the room.

Kunala is well aware that he has judged the case by a display of power and that his father might have acted with more wisdom. He could feel that

Kodini is not in the least impressed because his views clash with the morals and customs of the Brahman village. From any improvement in the hunter's camp, he also expects little. He discusses with Kappa the case in the royal tent, into which he has moved since his betrothal.

Kappa is worried.

'It would be best if you could discuss this incident with my father.'

'The holy Maharajah ordered me to protect you!'

'Go swiftly to Pataliputra and take counsel with him. Let him judge the hunter. I deem it necessary for a Buddhist mission to come to Tirha.' Kappa leaves immediately; he dispatches yet another division of soldiers from Vaishali to Tirha. On the morning of the third day he arrives in the capital, at which time Ashoka is with Asandhimitra.

'Bring Kappa here!' orders the Emperor. When Ashoka is preoccupied with vexing matters and finds it onerous to take a decision, he consults Asandhi, who, out of her love for him, comprehends his innermost aspiration and judges with great wisdom.

Tishya Rakshita, her first-lady-in-waiting, was brought back by his soldiers as a young girl, following a mission to subdue her father, a rebellious Kshatriya. She was noticed by Asandhimitra and taken under her wing. Asandhi had the child educated and later took her on as her servant. Tishya has great respect for her mistress. She is proud and hotheaded by nature, yet a single word from the Maharani calms her down. Over time, the bond between the two women has become increasingly stronger. Tishya grew up to be a young lady of extraordinary beauty. Her charming oval face, her finely carved nose, her glittering eyes, yet soft on occasion, her supple, proportionate and slender figure – all make for a striking presence at the court. The Maharajah, struck by her devotion, treats her well. And Tishyarakshita, too, does not begrudge the laughter that gives her proud beauty a sudden charm, to Asandhimitra's beloved husband, to which even Ashoka is not quite immune.

'Stay, Tishya,' the Maharajah motions when she gets ready to leave. She floats down silently next to her mistress. Ashoka fails to notice the golden smile meant for him. It is then that Kappa makes an entrance.

'Why are you here, Kappa? I ordered you to protect the Prince.'

'The Yuvaraja wanted me to inform you, as quickly as possible, of events in Tirha, O, Maharajah.'

‘Tell me.’

‘Firstly, the Yuvaraja asks your permission for his marriage with the daughter of the holy Santanu.’

Ashoka smiles. ‘And further?’

Kappa then narrates the story of Diti. Ashoka does not interrupt him. He then sounds the gong.

‘Take a message to Sagka, Satyavat, that he immediately sends twenty heavily armed horsemen to Tirha, and afterwards five war elephants, each with a mahout and two warriors.’

‘I have already sent a guard from Vaishali, gracious Maharajah.’

‘Good. I do not trust that Katcha! How large is the hunters’ camp?’

‘Twenty to thirty men.’

‘Return to Tirha but make certain beforehand that you are clear about my orders.’

‘And Diti?’ asks the Agramahisi, when Kappa has left.

‘I cannot yet help her. I will ask Mahindra to send a mission to Tirha. Perhaps, she can free herself from the spell of those inhuman customs of the villagers.’

‘Order Kappa to protect her. I know the suffering of the widows in those barely civilised mahavana villages.’

‘Only Buddhism can provide a way to end the heartlessness of the one who, born and living in the mahavana, constantly perceives a menace around him—in the village and in the forest—and then casts his problems on to poor defenceless widows and the lowly-born. Such a man requires the Light of the Buddha to change his inner views.’

‘But even more the righteousness from the ivory throne!’

‘I wish that the Light of the radiant sun from Kapilavastu will pervade the black night of all these souls.’

‘If my beloved husband stretches out his arms and embraces his distressed subjects, as Kunala did with Diti, then it is certain to succeed.’

Ashoka smiles. ‘His deed delights me, Asandhi. In Mahindra, I recognise Devi, in Kunala, I recognise myself.’

‘Poor Mahindra. Does it hurt him to lose the leadership of the Sangha?’

‘No. With Mahindra nothing is more important than Buddhism itself.’

‘In that devotion I recognise you, my Maharajah.’

‘And yet it is different: for me Buddhism is a means, for him, the goal. He granted the heretics a place in the Sangha because his heart is compassionate and good even for those who harm the Sangha. I throw them out, because I find them destructive to my peoples. I have stupas built and sangharamas and viharas. A great deal of my revenues is spent on these. Do you think I do this to offer all those quarrelling monks joy in disputing? And I should put up with their heresy which paralyses the Sangha? I will support the Ashokarama but only if it spreads its welfare over India.’

As the Maharajah leaves, Tishya bows her head to the ground.

‘Stand up, Tyshiarakshita; a friend of the Agramahisi is my friend.’ A look of radiance comes his way ...

‘How now, Tishya? You weep?’

‘From joy, gracious Maharani! Did you hear what the great Maharajah called me, where others see only a slave girl?’

‘You a slave girl, my Tishya? You are a proud Kshatriya. Dry your tears, they will ruin your pretty eyes!’

‘Kshatriya as long as the gracious Maharani has me under her wing. The anthapura does not tolerate my pride.’

‘I will protect you till my death, my Tishya, and then the Maharajah will.’

‘When you die, I wish to die with you!’ She sobs.

‘Come, Kshatriya! Come with me to the court hall. Tell Tinka to bring my cloak.’

‘I shall get it myself, High Agramahisi.’

‘No! Tinka! Dry your eyes and straighten your clothes.’ Asandhimitra receives a grateful look. Two servants with chamaras accompany the Maharani. Ashoka receives the women with a warm glance, which then rests favourably on Tishya. An enticing laugh betrays how she delights at this singular honour.

Ashoka orders that the hunter Tulya be brought before him. In-between a few guards stands the young man, hair and thin beard dishevelled, his dhoti wrapped carelessly around his waist, his upper-cloth of fur so loose that his broad and hairy chest is exposed. He looks at the Maharajah in fear, as though the mere presence of the Maharajah is ominous. When the clear

eyes of the Emperor meet his, he lowers them; yet it is as though a glimpse of a great soul has bored through him, and he knows that the Maharajah's verdict will be just. This calms him. If he is to be killed then it will be on the orders of the sacred Maharajah.

'Bring the guilty before me!' They seize the hunter and stand him before the judges. Tulya falls to his knees and brings his folded hands to his forehead, bending forward until his hair touches the ground.

'Stand up! What is your name?' The hunter directs his dark eyes at the Emperor and with his hands brushes his hair backwards.

'Tulya, Lord.'

'You are a hunter, Tulya, you face the fiercest of forest animals and do not fear, perhaps, even the wildest. What took possession of you that you could assault a weak and defenceless woman?'

Tulya barely understands the question. Yes, he committed the crime, but what *possessed* him?

'I do not know, Lord, what took possession of me. When a woman sets foot in our camp she is laying herself open to the wild beast in us that snatches whatever it is being fed. I am the youngest, the strongest, and perhaps the fiercest. So, I seize first and would have beaten off any rival ...'

'Diti was sent for Kawi, not for you!'

'Who would allow a woman to be sent into our camp as a bearer of a message, Lord? Everyone knows she would not be safe there. We live in the midst of nature. We do as nature tells us, and according to the laws of nature, Lord.'

'So, you are an animal, who only knows the law of the mahavana. You are not a human!'

'I am, Lord, but ... a man from the forest.'

'Have you ever heard of the Buddha?'

'Yes, Lord, and no.'

'He taught all people the law of compassion.'

'Diti is a widow, Lord, cursed because of sins committed in an earlier life. In Tirha there is no compassion for a widow without sons.'

'And do you not see yourself as a coward for having inflicted the worst of shame on such a weak woman, bereft of all assistance and succour? No one to protect her or to lend a hand to help when a bestial hunter overpowers her? Suppose, one of the hunters, much stronger than you, had

stood in front of you and had said to Diti: 'What are you doing out here in the camp of a people who are answerable only to the laws of the Mahavana. Go back to your homestead and protect your chastity!' What then would you have done, Tulya?'

Tulya lowers his head then looks the Maharajah straight in the eye.

'I might have backed off, Lord.'

'Why, Tulya?'

'Lord, because that hunter was stronger than me.'

'So, only because of that?' says the Maharajah sternly, yet disappointed.

'And ... because I would have thought that he had more right to her than me, Lord.'

'More right to commit a crime?'

'More right, since it is with his life that he protected her, Lord.'

'Right, Tulya. You did nothing to protect that unfortunate woman. You have made her life even more catastrophic than it was. We will take charge of the punishment. We will punish you, hurt you, so you will never again commit this crime, Tulya. From now on, every woman will be safe from your lust.'

Tulya trembles. The shame, to be a eunuch!

'Lord! Have me killed instead!'

'No!'

'Lord, I want to ... take Diti as wife. Gandharva marriage, Lord!' Tulya kneels down and holds up his bound hands.

'And deliver her to the hunters' camp?' says Ashoka.

Confused and scared, Tulya looks ahead.

'Lord! I shall perform my penance; keep away misery from her as long as I live, Lord! I wish to be a warrior or a hermit, or a farmer; whatever you want or Diti wants, Lord.' Once more Tulya bows his head to the ground. Ashoka keenly observes this 'man of nature' for several moments.

'Only for fear of losing your manhood!'

'Also, since I did Diti wrong and want to make good for what I did wrong, Lord. Perhaps, then she will be able to forget the camp!'

'You now realise, do you not, Tulya, that you have obeyed the laws of nature thoughtlessly, without thinking about the wounds you have inflicted. Maybe, now you will also understand that you are a human being with

manas, one who is aware of his urges and who must control them, and cultivate great compassion. You have seen a glimpse of the Light of the Buddha. Stand up.'

Ashoka looks directly into his wide eyes. There is something in Tulya that makes him trustworthy.

'You will go back to Tirha with my soldiers and request Diti to be your wife. If she agrees, you will do penance through complete devotion to her. If she refuses, then you are free to go, but beware you never meet my judges again, Tulya, because then you will be lost!'

'I shall be forever grateful to you, holy Maharajah.'

At a signal from Ashoka, Tulya is led out; in his eyes are reflected courage and joy.

The Emperor then leaves the courtroom with the Agramahisi.

'And if Diti mercifully accepts Tulya, my Lord?'

'My hand reaches far, Asandhi, rest assured. And Tyshiarakshita, is she also as concerned about the fate of an unknown woman?' Tishya looks at the Maharajah. The joy of being included by the mighty ruler in this discussion makes her smile upon him.

'For a Kshatriya, a gandharva marriage is as binding as a brahminical marriage, Lord. Kodini is guilty of a crime.'

'Your judgement is right, Tishya, but does not Diti arouse your compassion?'

'My compassion is not of much use, gracious Maharajah. Diti has the sympathy of India's beautiful Agramahisi.'

Asandhimitra notices how the reply, evasive though it is, strikes him, and as his gaze rests with satisfaction on the proud Kshatriya for a while, suddenly a swift thought registers in her mind. *That* is how she can secure Tishya's life!

A mission of Buddhist monks who through the power of their conviction have proved able of convincing the upasakas, now journeys towards Tirha.



ETERNAL DOUBT

The next morning, as Rohita kisses the flowering countryside, the ship that will bring Moggaliputta Tissa back to the Ashokarama approaches Pataliputra. Ashoka has the tidings announced throughout the city and, thus, thousands surge to the banks of the Ganga. A wooden plank covered with treasured carpets is laid out, connecting the bank and the ship; then the holy Maharajah makes his appearance. Ashoka welcomes his old Guru warmly and with great distinction. From his subjects he demands great reverence for the Brahmins and Sramanas but even greater are the demands he asks from the priests and bhikshus. He knows that the success of his life's work depends on their venerability. The heresy in the Sangha distressed him; a Sangha lacking the earnest vigour of bringing people to the path which the Buddha showed is as the Ganga without water, as a mango without juice. That is why he took the leadership away from Mahindra, which was not easy for his fatherly heart, and restored Moggali Tissa to his former position.

‘I thank you, holy Upagupta, that you honoured my wish. May the welfare of my peoples and your respect for the teachings of the Tathagata persuade you to accept with love the heavy task which I have dared to lay upon you, as head of the Sangha. I hope that your journey has not been too difficult.’

‘Nothing will be too heavy for me, O, Maharajah, if you, who watches over your peoples as a loving father does, are in need of my abilities. The Buddha worked till his last moments.’

The holy man walks alongside the Maharajah to the bank. His shorn head, browned by the jungle, above the yellow robe, his dignified mien and steady pace, his stateliness, are by themselves sufficient to impress the gathering crowd, enhanced even more by the reverence which he is being shown by the Maharajah, the Maharani, and the bhikshus. The opulently decorated elephants, surrounded by the Emperor’s soldiers, take the delegation regally through the city and to the palace.

Seated beside the Agramahisi on the third elephant is Tishyarakshita. Asandhimitra has requested this special favour of Ashoka. His smile implies approval. ‘As the first-lady-in-waiting to the Agramahisi,’ he had said. ‘And most loyal friend,’ she had laughed in response. Yet, Tishya herself feels offended that she had to wait on the elephant till the Agramahisi returned. But she wills her eyes to show only friendliness, as Asandhimitra returns to her place. When Moggali Tissa does not seem to notice her, she is offended once again. She conceals her indignation, however, behind appealing laughter, as she usually does whenever she is forced to step back at official events by the rules of the court.

In the intimate ambience of his work-room, Ashoka brings the Arhat up to date with the situation in the Ashokarama.

‘I wish, holy father, that all unworthy elements be removed and that a meeting be called of all the bhikshus at which the Teachings, as the Buddha has given them to us, will be established forever.’

‘Just like the meeting of Vaishali: A concerted action of all the trustworthy men from the viharas, the most able, the most worthy. To have that decreed, which is believed to be just and good and so have acknowledged forever the irrefutable.’

‘So it must be. We shall impel all the bhikshus to take what is the Buddha’s into their hearts and minds, and expel the heretics.’

‘If we could start with a thousand serious bhikshus, gracious Maharajah.’

They then decided to establish a Canon of Buddhism, and begin investigations the following day¹.

‘And what does Your Gracious Majesty expect of me?’

‘I want from you reinforcement in introducing the Dharma to the whole world so that man will be inspired by a love for peace and hatred for war and so usher in the welfare of humanity.’

‘What does Your Gracious Majesty understand as Dharma?’

‘Dharma, holy Tissa, is that in each religion, which makes it worthy of the peoples’ reverence for it: The sara of all religions, that which is not part of man as natural being but is part of the All-Spirit², which the Brahmins call Atman, that which he recognises within the deepest part of his being as ‘good’. That recognition of human value, regardless of varna or sect, is Dharma. The only ritual, which is worthy to be followed, is the Dharma-rite, the fulfilment of the Dharma: the eternally elementary, universal true and good. The unprejudiced understanding of the relative merits of the gods and rites of all sects, in relationship to the Eternal, the inner essence ... That is what the Buddha requires of man. And I want more, noble Upagupta. I want to carry the awareness of the Dharma beyond the borders of my empire, to the whole world, so that wars may become an abomination. I wish to carve out the Dharma on rocks and pillars.’

‘Your noble designs dazzle me, holy Maharajah. But what will be the ways with which you can influence people in this direction?’

‘By sending missions to foreign lands. By silencing the battle drums, by sounding the drum of Dharma over the entire world. I want to disperse lipis to all the viharas to instruct what must be reflected upon if one is to remain in the Sangha. My pradesikas, rajukas, and kumaras³, will proclaim Dharma to my people. And my Dharma-mahamatras will journey through every part of my empire, and with thoroughness, examine whether my officers are imparting Dharma to my subjects and whether they govern my country in the spirit of Dharma. My subjects have the duty to live according to it but also the right to demand it of my government. The immense riches coming in from my empire have no value, if they repose in my treasuries, but they do if they serve to further the temporal welfare on earth and the eternal welfare after this life. The wealth of the world is: prosperity and Dharma for its people. That is what I am looking for during my reign and for the future far ahead. Kunala shall be the first to follow in my path and be a good judge.’

‘And when Kunala dies?’

Ashoka smiles. 'Why would the gods ruin him when they protected me from a thousand perils? Moreover, Kunala will have sons. And the welfare of the world is not dependent on me or my successors, but on Dharma, holy Tissa. Dharma must become the great propelling force in the world.'

'For such a sacred pursuit, I will be only too happy to lend all aid in my powers, Lord.'

The next day the great Arhat begins his task, purifying the Sangha. Ashoka himself is present to support Tissa in his difficult work. Under Tissa's supervision, twenty selected bhikshus quiz the monks in the ashram: 'What did the Buddha teach and what did he require of the bhikshu?' In the course of the discussion, those of the monks who do not, by the strength of their conviction, justify their monk-hood, must take off their yellow robe, clothe themselves in white and depart from Pataliputra. He may not show himself in any city or township that houses a vihara. Ashoka, too, throws his own questions to a few of the monks, including Sama and Shantanika. Sama is cast out but Shantanika knows too well the Buddhist doctrine to allow himself to be unmasked. Ashoka requests him to come to him in the evening.

A long line of bhikshus, dressed in white, leaves the Ashokarama and moves towards the gates of the city. Only for a moment do they attract the attention of the passersby. Ashoka's prosperous Pataliputra summons men to work and there is little interest in meddling with the more or less holy men from the palace and the Ashokarama.

In the evening Shantanika is brought before Ashoka.

'You preach a heretical doctrine in the ashram, Shantanika.'

The monk looks surprised. 'I did not know that I did, noble Maharajah.'

'You wish to elevate the Buddha to a god.'

'Yes, if I were master of the Sangha, noble Maharajah. It is a serious concept, in my opinion.'

'The accomplished, enlightened Buddha has clearly shown the path to his followers: observance of the right attitude to life through contemplation of his teachings. He does not want us to lose ourselves in unsolvable problems. And it is those kinds of problems, unanswerable questions, that you raise.'

'The Buddha has said: 'Because there exists however, you monks, an unborn an un-originated, an uncreated and unformed, there is a path to be

found for the born, the become, the made, the formed.' Why should we not reflect on that if it seizes our interest?'

'But the Buddha has come to help mankind especially to free it from the power-greedy priests, who had kept the people away from all that is good and beneficial for them. A new godhead will create a new priesthood, with new powers, emerging out of a desire for their own welfare. You want the bhikshus to become priests but the Buddha desires a change of inner view and attitude of all the people!'

'What is, 'doing good, avoiding evil and keeping the mind pure'? It is like a leaf ripped from a tree and floating in the air, vulnerable to the wind, O, Maharajah. Man wants to recognise a higher being, who orders him, and whom he heeds, whom he can venerate and beseech to in his time of need: a god who is present! Not a holy man who has attained Nirvana, gone into 'nothingness', just as a flame that expires when the oil is used up. Do you think that the ordinary man will be honest and good and control his thoughts and passions for that? Would he control, for a 'nirvana', all what is within his nature, which drives all his thoughts, his passions, pleasures, life-thirst? He, who thinks that, does not know the citizen of India, O, Maharajah.'

'But you want a god of outward appearance fossilised into an unchangeable form. That is not what the Buddha wants! The Upanishads came to the Atman through meditation. The Brahmins have fossilised the Atman into the god Brahma. That is precisely what the Buddha does not want! On all what cannot be expressed in words anymore and which is beyond thoughts, on what in meditation disappears into inaccessible realms, the more one rises into the higher states of meditation, the Buddha keeps silent. He wishes to be a teacher, to show to mankind, to millions of my subjects, a path that will lift them out of the jungle of suffering!'

'A more vigorous belief is required to resist the will to live. Inner strength is often too weak for that. The 'man' Buddha will not be able to bind the Indians, O, Maharajah. He is merely a teacher, moved by compassion, who disappeared into Nirvana, the 'nothingness'!'

'And what about you and I and the thousands who honour his teachings?'

'But you yourself, O, Maharajah, had to uproot the heretics. You have displaced your son, put Mogaliputtatissa in his place. Had the Buddha proclaimed: 'I am Brahma', he would have won all over the world. Now he

needs the support of the most powerful Emperor of the world. There is no temple of wood whose foundation is not undermined by white ants. Why not establish a temple of granite that keeps its treasure safe forever? What will be the fate of the Sangha when you die, O, Maharajah?’

‘My son thinks as I do.’

‘And his son, O, mighty Maharajah?’

‘When he will reign, the people and he will have grown to be one in conviction and dedication for the teachings of the Buddha.’

‘Because I do not believe in that I want people to perceive the Buddha as God, as I do; an almighty God, from the Tushita heaven, an All-being, as Atman, say the Upanishads. Is that ‘outward appearance’? He has revealed his will to the world, notwithstanding the coincidental Maharajah who happens to be in power! If you do not want that, noble Maharajah, master of the Sangha, then the Sangha is at the mercy of the ruler in power ... be his name Kunala or ... Jalauka!’

‘I do not want it because the Buddha has given the sara, the essence of all religions, for us to reflect upon. What worth has compassion if it be upon orders from your God! The inner awareness of mankind must change. That there exists an unborn, an unfolding into all manifestations of creation, is a belief that I wish to respect but it is not meant for contemplation, because it is an unsolvable problem. The Buddha renounces this! The Buddha beheld under the Bodhi-tree what is the loftiest in a man. One who will experience this, lives it, and becomes one with it, enters Nirvana. The Tathagata showed us the way and we are to follow it out of free will, moved by compassion, and not out of fear of your punishing God. What you want the Buddha does not and I will not tolerate it in the Sangha. It is heresy, pure Brahmin dogma! That is why I forbid your stay in the Ashokarama and every vihara in my realm, Shantanika. I believe in your good faith, but not in your Buddhism. So, take off your yellow robe.’

‘Forgive me, noble Maharajah, that I do not place trust in the Buddhism of your successors. I cannot do this, not as long as there is no power that saves them from apostasy, and as long as that power does not reside in the soul of the people as the eternal, divine Buddha, who assumed the mortal being of a man and became the Buddha.’

‘But Buddha the God, and the bhikshu the priest, that is a fabrication.’

Ashoka makes a sign; for him, the conversation has ended. Yet, doubt remains, twofold: Is it possible to maintain the purity of Buddha's teachings despite the ever-present Shantanikas? Will the throne of Pataliputra have to be its support forever? Without the power of an army, without war? And what if, on some unholy day, a heretic were to usurp the throne of the Mauryas? And what if a powerful people, in a distant land, who do not accept the teachings of Buddha, invade India, without a power at hand to stop them? No, no more war! Establish the Teachings and spread it all over the world! Then humanity will never have to seek recourse to bloodshed and carnage which does not assuage but sharpens the appetite for even more bloodshed.

'Tinka, bring the Kashmir-shawl and the red silk coat for the gracious Maharani. Then my muslin dress and pink scarf.'

'I serve the Maharani, not you.' Tishya angrily grabs at Tinka's wrist.

'You will obey me, or I shall punish you,' she snaps at Tinka. 'If you disobey, the Maharani will become angry. I must help her dress and accompany her to the park.' She shoves Tinka's arm away in anger. 'Hurry!'

Asandhimitra has heard the conversation. 'Be kind and good to the slaves and servants, Tishya,' she says plainly. 'That is the will of the Maharajah. You are quick to anger. Control yourself in joy and anger. That is befitting of the higher varnas.'

Tishya bows. 'Forgive me, high Agramahisi.'

'It is alright now! Take your blue scarf, not your pink.'

Tishya smiles. 'You indulge my vanity, gracious Maharani.'

A few moments later, the two women make their way to the park and the pavilion near the large pond, with Tishya walking a pace behind her mistress. Sharad⁴ has ended Varsha⁵. A few silver clouds float in the blue heavens and veil Surya's rays. The floral splendour of Ashvina⁶ winds around trees and shrubs. The jasmine shrubs bend their branches laden with ivory blossoms towards the pond, as if in vanity mirroring themselves in the pond's surface. Ashoka-trees and Bandhujivas⁷ blush in the dazzling light and scatter recklessly the red dust from their blossoms over path and plant. Dark-red Nalikas⁸ dream softly between the round, light-green leaves, floating over crystalline waters as if gazing, love-struck, at the frail lilies

along the edges, which charmingly unveil themselves and in all splendour draw up out their crowns in graceful lines.

‘Ashvina is the bride. Who shall be the bridegroom, Tishya?’

‘The holy Maharajah. He is the bridegroom of all beauty!’

Asandhi gives out a laugh. ‘My vain beauty has lost its glow a long time ago!’ May he be the bridegroom of the most beautiful lady who veils her dark bosom in heavenly blue.’

Tishya blushes. She is fully aware that the unseemly Maharajah often settles his glittering gaze upon her. But she, a bride to the Maharajah! She is as much of a Kshatriya as Karuvaki, as Padmavathi. Asandhimitra does not notice the haughty look in the eyes of her serving maid – Rani Tishya Rakshita!

‘A servant maid, O, Maharani!’

Asandhimitra gently teases: ‘Then you would not reject the possibility!’

‘Would a mango, intended to be consumed, spurn being returned to the earth and there to grow into a strong tree, the loftiest accomplishment for a mango?’

‘The most beautiful fruit,’ the Agramahisi laughs.

‘And the one we like to eat the best!’ mocks Tishya lightly.

They enter the pavilion. A few slaves gently wave the chamaras to impart some coolness and to chase away mosquitoes. Asandhimitra lies on a long seat covered with a beautiful rug from Iran and Tishya sits down at the queen’s feet.

‘The Maharajah will come soon. He loves Ashvina’s beauty and Kartika’s⁹ fruit. Whatever flowers ripen and bear splendid fruit, enchants the Maharajah. And the immense empire is still too small for his great heart.’

‘Then why does the Maharajah not send his armies out!’

The remark alarms Asandhimitra. Then she laughs softly. ‘You are a Kshatriya, my Tishya, young and rash. That is exactly where his greatness lies: to win over through compassion and love, what he could conquer by force.’

‘Your varna is wise and wants peace; mine is proud and wants to fight.’

‘But the Buddha says: ‘everyone is a Brahmin, who honours truth and justice.’”

‘Your thoughts have been ripened to beauty through centuries of deliberation, high Agramahisi; mine are connected to the chilly caprices of nature. That is why I am lost without your warmth, your mellowness of spirit, O, Maharani.’

‘There now, I once again recognise my loyal friend who seeks the eight-fold path of the Buddha.’

Tishya’s finely shaped lips curl into the sweetest of smiles. The Maharani believes she can awaken in Tishya the softer feelings of Buddhism, but Tishya herself knows better. After being abducted as a young girl from the great house on top of the mountain and torn from her father and brother, who chose death rather than submission to the Maharajah, she was lovingly received by the Maharani, who taught her Buddha’s compassion. Yet, within her lived the spirit of the unrestrained and imperious Kshatriya. She envies the Maharani, not for her mildness, but for her high rank, which allows her to be mild. She is not impressed that Asandhimitra permits her inferiors great freedom but that she has the power to raise her, Tishya, from a servitor to that of a friend of the gracious Maharani. To be powerful! Behind the smile on her beautiful face, behind her watchfulness, she is able to conceal her fierce desire of the mahavana. She loathes her servitude, but created an outward appearance of attending to her mistress submissively and is dutiful to the Maharani who grew affectionately attached to this beautiful, clever child.

When Surya has climbed to the apex of the heaven the Maharajah leaves the palace and hurries to the pond. Tishya rises up and proceeds to a smaller pavilion on the other side. Ashoka sits down silently beside the Agramahisi, his thoughts still on the work of the morning. When he turns to her, most often it is about those issues on which his human feelings cannot come to terms with practical considerations.

‘What preoccupies my Maharajah so?’ she finally asks.

‘My son, Asandhi. I have been confident that he will succeed me one day. But now, for the first time, I sense a danger threatening him. I myself would have laughed at such a thing in the past. I often tempted dangers and anticipated them everywhere. Kunala is not aware of them; that is why they are more threatening to him. I am worried. Where Kunala is concerned, I am inclined to sweep danger away for him.’

‘Weak in your love?’

‘I am not certain if it is weakness. Kunala is so much interwoven with my life’s work, I will not permit any loose thread for that. One of the new monks reveres the Buddha as the all-powerful God and attempted, with his ideas, to make inroads with the bhikshus. According to him, the pure teachings should be based on Buddha’s divinity so they will become a divine command, acquire greater solidity and thus a more loyal following. I consider him a heretic, because I believe this goes against the Teachings. The moral power of these Teachings is so great that no man can remain insensitive to them. But as always, doubt returns to my heart. Each successive Maharajah will have to acquire the same conviction as I have. Kunala will be as I am. Will his son be so as well? Kunala is weaker of mind than I am, meeker! And his son?’

‘My Maharajah will never be able to discern the way of his descendants. Your power has come into being and so it will pass away. Have faith in the greatness of the Buddha, which inspires you, and perhaps will also inspire your offspring.’

‘Has the Buddha himself not come into being and will he not ...’

‘Yes, the Buddha himself! But not his Teachings! Those are eternal, they are the sara of all religions; they come from the All-Spirit.’

Ashoka ponders for a moment. ‘Do you see, Asandhi: the eternal doubt! Buddha has become and perished, just as you and I will perish.’

Asandhi laughs. ‘Would you have it otherwise?’

‘When Kunala passes away, will all that I have built, fall apart? Will then Buddha’s edifice, his Teachings, also fall apart? Is Santanika right? Is my will sufficient: to perpetuate Buddha’s Teachings in the Council of Thousand of Pataliputra; preserving Buddha’s relics in the many stupas; my Dharma, on rocks and pillars ... Is there but one law: ‘what becomes, perishes’?’

‘You have more sons.’

‘None to whom I could entrust India.’

‘How will you gain more certainty?’

‘By Dharma, that will be engraved onto stone as an eternal reminder of what is right. Each Maharajah will then be well chosen because the spirit of the people will direct it.’

‘By Dharma, as it exists in the hearts of the people, for which your edicts will only serve to stimulate. Your hope is to make the whole world

ready for that spirit. But the defencelessness of Buddhism may also be its downfall. With your strong army you sustain your power. Is it wise to place all your hope on your one son? Take Tishyarakshita into your harem.'

'Your servant, Tishyarakshita?'

'I love her and she shall be a good Rani.'

'You want to bind a blossoming young virgin to a man who has forgotten his youth, who can no longer charm such a young Rani?'

'She worships you and is my dearest friend.'

Ashoka walks to the small pavilion.

'Would it be good fortune for Tishya to be a Rani in the anthapura?'

Tishya rises, proffering fully her beautiful figure. Then she kneels and bows deeply, in that way hiding her deepening blush that darkens her sultry features.

'Who would not deem herself fortunate to be your Rani, gracious Maharajah?'

'You will be sacrificing your youth for a shadow of good fortune, child. My life is my love ... for my peoples.'

'What can love mean for a wife of the holy Maharajah? Is not the life of the Agramahisi elevated far above all that a woman can expect from life?'

'You love the Maharani?'

'As much as a sister, or as a mother, gracious Maharajah! She has given my life back when in my youth all that was beautiful to me was taken away from me. She must be so good because she is your Maharani.'

Ashoka smiles. 'Then try to become like her, Tishya.'

'I will never be able to succeed, I can merely strive, Lord.'

'That is enough, Tishya. Go to her. She will be happy.'

A section of the Rani's quarters is set aside for Tishya. Ashoka realises that it is difficult for her to face up to the servants in the anthapura. For this reason, he is not sparing. She is allowed to arrange her rooms and choose her dresses to her own taste. The choice of servants, however, still requires approval by Satyavat and Rohini. The happiness of the beautiful Kshatriya charms the Emperor.



THE WHEEL OF THE TEACHINGS

After the rains, Kartika ripens the fruit of many blossoms. Tirha's rice fields glimmer with a golden glow in the shimmering sunlight. Everything is being readied for the harvest of the paddy. There is joy in the dazzling life of Sharad. The offering fires burn now here, then there, inviting the gods not only to eat but also to protect the harvests.

In the late afternoon Kunala sits with Santanu on the verandah. The brahmacharins are searching the mahavana for wood for the offering fires or tending the guru's livestock in the pastures. The pungent fragrance of the smoke from the small altar fills the air and drives the mosquitoes away. Kanchana walks to and fro. Her beauty blossoms in even more lovely colours and sprightly activity. Her smile radiates at Kunala when their eyes meet. Meditatively his gaze wanders over the luxuriant leaves, blossoms and fruit ... that will to live even in the tiniest jungle spider, the frailest flower, without the slightest care of the hurts that it inflicts. But also Buddha's spirit pervades the world. Is trishna and the spirit of the Buddha, one? Is that the Atman? Or, is Buddha's spirit the regulator of the imperturbable trishna that functions through every living being? Take trishna away, will Buddha's spirit then still exist? Or, is then all that remains, Nirvana? Are the two not actually one because of their very

polarity? What is the truth concealed in a world so much woven into maya? The world-creator! 'He knows ... Or, does he not know either?'

Hush. Does he not hear the breaking of branches in the distance? Then it is as if an earthquake is causing the ground to shake. It does not stop; it is approaching! Is it the work of men who are plaguing the jungle? The crashing continues, and swells; the cracking more persistent and sharper. Santanu also becomes more observant. Suddenly he leaps up.

'Elephants! There is no elephant path here. Being driven?'

When the noise of the cracking and breaking of stout branches approaches, Santanu rushes into the house: 'Flee, Yuvaraja! On horse or elephant! I will warn the others,' he calls to Kunala. The Prince does not answer but hurries to the camp, getting a few horses and elephants readied. Riding quickly back to the house, he sees in the distance how a massive elephant suddenly thrusts its head through the branches at the forest's edge, its enraged eyes directed at Santanu's house. The Yuvaraja has Santanu and Amba mount the imperial elephant as swiftly as possible. He then calls loudly: 'Kancha, Kancha!'

Startled, Kancha appears at the window and with fear looks out to the forest from where more and more wild elephants emerge, hesitating a moment before the wide open space. They then approach with raised or swinging trunks, menacing, and with tremendous trumpeting. Kunala has his largest war elephant come right up to the front of the door, climbs on the roof and helps Kancha out through the window and into the howda. All are safe and Kappa gives the order to leave hastily. The elephant leading the stampede, a massive bull, has just drawn close to them. He raises his trunk and swings it sharply, but the mahouts in the rear turn, and with their sharp elephant hooks land a few painful blows on the attacker. Then, as though aware he has not succeeded, the irate animal starts attacking man's constructions in the woods. Aroused, the other elephants follow. From a distance the inhabitants of the house watch as the house is smashed, trampled and kicked. Everything splinters and breaks. Fearfully someone cries out: 'Father Santanu! Father! Forgiveness, father Santanu!' It is Katcha, hanging from a window in mortal fear of his life. A huge elephant stretches its trunk out to him while all around him, planks and beams, crack under the assault of the furious herd. Kunala orders a halt. Kappa shrugs his shoulders.

‘We cannot leave Katcha behind.’ Then turning to a pair of mahouts, he asks: ‘Will you take the risk with the largest elephants?’

‘We were Maharaja Bindusara’s elephant hunters, Lord!’

‘The two of you, please try. We are going to protect the Prince,’ cries Kappa.

Both mahouts turn around the massive war elephants which calmly amble towards the house. Through his rage the bull sees the two tame animals coming and the memory of the piercing hooks proves very unpleasant. It swings away from the dwelling, trumpets loudly and charges off towards Tirha. The others follow ferociously and the ground resounds under their thundering feet.

‘This will end badly for Tirha, Lord!’

‘Tirha? Send messengers!’ shouts Kunala.

Kappa gives his swiftest horseman orders to ride instantly to Tirha by another route.

‘Wild elephants!’ The cry causes great excitement in the whole settlement. There is bellowing, shouting, crying for their children. An indescribable confusion takes over. All flee to places they regard safe from the kings of the mahavana. Some climb the sturdier trees from where they watch the catastrophe. They hear the thudding along the road, the angry trumpeting of the herd quickly approaching the houses. Enraged, the animals attack the simple dwellings, tear apart the thatched roofs, take everything down with their trunks, stamp on and break everything under their heavy feet. Not a single house is spared; it is as if the rage of the animals has turned against the possessions of the people who had earlier laid siege to them with arrows and spears but now shelter safely in the tall trees beyond the reach of the trunks of the provoked animals. After everything has been destroyed the bull screams loud and all the beasts immediately follow, fearful of losing sight of the herd. They run wildly through paddy and wheat fields and invade the mahavana with a deafening cracking of branches and trees. Eventually, all sounds fade into the distance and the inhabitants of the devastated village return hesitatingly from their hiding places, searching through the remains of the houses and property for anything left unharmed.

Anxiously, they wonder what sin has caused such a disaster to befall on the village: Have the rituals and offering not been conducted in an

appropriate way? Kodini then returns, weeping. 'Where is Upamatali? Diti! Where is Upamatali! Tell me, slut!'

'I do not know, mother Kodini,' cries Diti.

'You forgot to take him with you!' screeches Kodini. 'Oh, gods! Where is my son, my darling! Gone! Trampled by the elephants! Upamatali!'

People approach Kodini and enquire. 'What is it?'

'Oh! Upamatali is gone!' She tears at her clothing, her hair, and throws herself to the ground, kicking and screaming.

'What do you want, fool?' asks Matali, who has drawn near.

'My son! That is the punishment! Help me, Varuna!'

Kodini, the guilty one? The villagers gather from all around.

'What punishment? Why? Tell us!' Matali grabs a stick.

'Oh, Kawi! The hunters! The elephants! Upamatali is dead because of me!'

'Have you ...? Speak up or I will beat you!'

Through her tears and sobs, Kodini relates what happened. When she mentions Katcha, the Brahmin, most of the people turn away. A Brahmin! One does not meddle with a Brahmin! But Matali chastises Kodini severely, until Upamatali suddenly comes sliding down from a tree and clutches his mother.

Kunala, Kappa and Santanu have drawn nearer. The Yuvaraja, shrewd as his father, immediately makes the connection between Diti, the elephant stampede, and Kodini's words. Some guards are sent for Kawi, others to fetch Katcha. However, Kawi's camp has been vacated, and the hunters have fled. Katcha has also disappeared without a trace. A courier is sent to Pataliputra and a few days later a large detachment of Ashoka's builders arrives to rebuild the destroyed village. A mission from the Ashokarama also arrives under the leadership of Utanka. The residents of Tirha have built simple thatched huts to sleep in, and during the day they live outside. Life goes on. The men go out to reap what is left of the harvest. When the sun sets and all have returned from their work, they trek to the camp of the men in the yellow robes, hesitant in the beginning, but slowly growing more courageous as they see the Yuvaraja and his bride also coming to listen to the monks. Utanka has informed Kunala of the Emperor's wishes. The Yuvaraja and his bride have taken their places on a skilfully woven rug from Arachosa. Utanka waves the villagers to draw near and sit down. Only

his slender figure rises above the squatting people. Far back at the rear sits Diti, hunched up; she does not dare to sit amongst the others. So rarely does a storyteller come to Tirha. His narration will be as the seasoning on the rice, as honey with the ghee. Full of expectation, they look at Utanka in his yellow robe. Only his left arm and chest, his powerful neck and head, are uncovered. They wait. Now and then their eyes wander over the Brahmin lady, Kanchanamala, and the noble Yuvaraja or to the beautifully decorated elephant a little to the side under the shade of the tall sal trees, or to the guards who always accompany the Prince. Utanka then raises his voice and all listen.

THE BUDDHA

‘Surya climbs down behind the hills and the dark clouds. His rays no longer penetrate through to us. But in the distance, to the north, you can see the shimmering mountains of the holy *Hymavant*¹, which rise from deep within the earth. The mahavana stretches towards its sides but reaches no further than the feet of the giants. Above, the peaks glitter pure and unblemished in Rohita’s dazzling light. Why will Surya’s rays no longer shine upon us when they still shine upon the mighty crags and peaks of the glittering mountains? Because they are high up, higher than any construction of man, than all creations of nature, than all that grows against its walls; because they are so holy that the gods chose them for their dwelling. Thus shines also an exalted light upon Ashoka, the holy Maharajah of Aryavarta, because he is the highest among all men. But not only is he the highest in might and rank but also the highest in manas, in human greatness. That is why the Light of the world shines upon him while you grope around in the darkness of the mahavana. The great Light of the world! The Tathagata, who went the way of the Buddha, the Sugata, who took the right course, the Bhagwan, the blessing of mankind, the Exalted One. The holy Maharajah glows in the Light of the glorious Accomplished Buddha. When famine plagues the people he saves them from hunger. Why does he save them? When the summer sun scorches the fields, he has canals dug which quench the thirsty fields with water from the rivers. Why has he scattered the sacred waters over the fields? Pilgrims and merchants travel along the roads, dying of thirst, with no roof or refreshment along their hard journey: the holy Maharajah maintains the roads, has wells dug, rest houses built and mango

trees planted. Why does he care for the travellers trudging on the roads? Wild elephants destroy homes, paddy and wheat fields in villages. He sends his builders, his helpers and his food supplies, to support you during your calamities. Why does he send them?

Because the Light of the world shines upon him, the compassion and love of the Prince of Kapilavastu, the Enlightened Buddha!

The Bodhisattva has experienced countless rebirths. His good karma has been built up to the heavens and after his last incarnation he appeared as Vessantara amongst the devas of the Tushita-heaven. Just once more is he to return to earth, to lead the lost humanity, including you, to the way of liberation from suffering and rebirths. Where will he appear, to which mother will he be born? His eyes fall upon the kingdom of the Shakyas of Raja Suddhodana in Kapilavastu, under the protection of the heavenly-high Hymavant, and upon his queen Maya, with her fine, smiling face, beautiful presence, her lovely voice, her friendliness and soft-heartedness. When the Bodhisattva descends from heaven, a gleaming light shines over the world and penetrates the darkness, because it is without shadow and pales the sun and moon alike. It is in the month of Vaisakha, when the earth is covered with a carpet of flowers and the trees burst with clouds of blossoms. There is an atmosphere of benevolence and love among the people; hatred and envy, passion, blinding pride and cruelty, fall away from them. The air is filled with heavenly sounds and songs. Rani Maya falls asleep: she dreams of gods who take her from the earth high up to the shimmering peaks of the Himalayas. Goddesses bathe her in holy waters and adorn her with heavenly robes. She sees a holy elephant, with six pure-white ivory tusks, approach. He becomes tinier and tinier and burrows into the right side of her motherly body. It will be a happy time for her. Miraculous healing powers exude from her unborn child. The possessed are relieved of their demons, the blind from the darkness, the sick are cured of their ills. After ten moons the time of birth has arrived, the winds die down; there is a deep stillness in nature, the spring flowers open earlier than usual, glorious fragrances fill the air. Then, Queen Maya goes to the lovely gardens of Lumbini, where all the trees are in blossom. There the Bodhisattva is born, *Savarthasiddhi*² is his name. A glowing light with no end shoots through the heavens. All vile feelings in nature are muted. Seven days later Rani Maya dies and is taken up to the heaven of the thirty-three devas, because she is too exalted to be touched yet by earthly passions. The Rani's sister

cares for the young Prince. In the Himalyas lives a recluse, the elderly and holy Asita. He sees the glowing light and feels that a great happiness has descended on earth; he descends from the mountains to Kapilavastu and continues on to the palace. The king hands the child over to him and Asita notices that he bears the thirty-two signs of the *mahapurusha*, the highest human being. He foretells the king that one day the little Prince will be the most powerful ruler, or an enlightened Buddha, who will bestow the teachings of compassion. As Siddharta grows older his father is troubled that the young Prince shows little inclination of becoming a world-ruling King but that his being develops into earnestness and meditation, to retreat from the world. He wants his son to marry so he will turn away from the path leading to Buddha-hood! After a long search, they find a girl for him, *Bimbadevi*³, who satisfies all requirements, and she becomes his wife. Many women are offered to him to gladden his life. Raja Suddhodana still hopes that the joys of the life of a Prince will keep him away from the path of the Buddha. He builds three palaces for him, one for winter, one for summer and one for the rainy season. The gateways are secured so that he will not escape by night. The most beautiful women are provided to give him joy with music, songs and dance. Anything that may injure the Prince is painstakingly kept away from his path. Wherever he goes there are flowers strewn. But one day, when he leaves the gateway of the city on the Easterly side, the devas dispatch on to his path an old man, grey of beard and ailing, as an omen. The charioteer⁴ tells him that all people grow old. The Prince, whose heart overflows with compassion, returns to the palace, saddened. The next time he leaves through the Southern gateway and meets a fatally ill man, again sent by the devas. Until this moment, he had not known illness and once again he returns to the palace filled with pain. The third time he leaves, he uses the Western gateway and sees a dead man lying on the road. He is alarmed and the charioteer explains what a dead man is, one who has left his family to cross over into the other world. Again, the Prince is shocked and laments about the transience of youth, life, and the suffering because of old age, sickness and death. And he returns. When he again leaves through the Northern gateway, he meets a mendicant monk. His gaze radiates mildness, his being serenity, his bearing is self-controlled. He is dressed in the robe of an ascetic and stands with his begging bowl beside the road. In answering the Prince's question about who he is, the charioteer says, a *bhikshu*, free of carnal lust, passion and hate,

living in peace for his own spiritual well-being. The Prince is overjoyed, praises the life of the bhikshu. Frightening dreams trouble Yashodara but the Bodhisattva knows what is to come, separation. During the night he goes to his father to ask permission to leave. Through his tears, the King tries to stop him, promising everything he wants if he would just stay.

‘If you can promise me four things, Father, I will stay. Eternal youth, whereupon no ageing follows, unfading beauty, eternal good health not threatened by illness, and eternal life without death.’

The King acknowledges that this is impossible.

‘Then promise me at least that when I die I will not be born again.’

Again, the King cannot, whereupon he declares his willingness to let his son go, for the benefit of the world. Still he has much difficulty letting him go. He strengthens the guards at the gateways, surrounds his son with all kinds of enticement, prepares feasts at the palace at which the most beautiful women from the country must attempt to enchant him through music and dance, a delighting of senses, that should keep him away from his lofty goal. Amidst all the splendour of the glorious court festivities, the Bodhisattva falls into *dhyana*, meditation. When he awakens, he sees by the light of the fragrant lamps that the women, now that the Prince is no longer paying attention to them, have fallen asleep. The false beauty has fled away. The girls lay, unbecomingly, all around. There is nothing charming or enchanting left; on the contrary, the wide-open mouths, the unmelodious sounds they emit, fill him with disgust. More than ever, he longs for the life of the ascetic, because all this sensuality carries within it the seed of death and suffering. He orders Chandaka, his charioteer, to saddle his horse Kanthaka. Chandaka tries to convince the Prince to enjoy his youth. When he gets older there will be time enough to renounce the world.

‘Pleasure is fleeting, Chandaka, like rushing waters from the mountains, like autumn clouds that arise and then suddenly disappear, as lightning in the heavens, like bubbles in the water, like mirages in the desert, like a dream! It is, Chandaka, like the thirst after drinking salt water, dangerous as the head of a cobra.’

His decision is as steadfast as Mount Meru: the great separation, for the good of the world. He goes to Yashodara’s sleeping chambers to say farewell to her and their newborn child. Yashodara is asleep, her arm protectively enfolding the little boy. Silently he leaves the room, mounts his steed Kanthaka, and in the night with Chandaka leaves the sleeping city.

*Yakshas*⁵ absorb Kanthaka's footsteps so that no one can hear. The horse trots forth in the darkness as if knowing the road the Bodhisattva must take. Above, the stars twinkle and shed their light upon the darkness of the mahavana. The night-time ride takes them through many regions. When they reach Anuvaineya the first light of the day breaks through the dark. The tired stars begin to pale. The Bodhisattva dismounts from his steed Kanthaka, gives Chandaka his Princely clothes, ornaments and his sword, after first using it to cut his hair off and having put on the ochre robe that is suitable for his life in the woods. He then sends Chandaka back to Kapilavastu. His precious horse is relinquished forever by his beloved master, who forsakes joy and pleasures for the good of the world.

Thus the noble Prince wanders now as a mendicant monk through the world, from hamlet to hamlet, from hermitage to hermitage. Yogi Arada⁶ teaches him to rise to a state of deep meditation, and Yogi Uddraka⁷ to reach a state beyond consciousness and un-consciousness. But he knows that this is not enough to take him to Nirvana. He journeys on with five pupils. Each is struck by his exalted mien and divine presence. King Bimbisara of Magadha tries to persuade him to remain in his kingdom; he will even give up a portion of his territory to him. He refuses. For six long years he practises the strictest asceticism. This should bring him to the realm of clear-knowing! Finally, he arrives in Uruvela on the Nairanyana with its lovely shores and calm waters. Here he wishes to stay. Because of his great spiritual skills he is able to withstand the rigours of ice-cold nights and sweltering hot days. He curbs all his senses so that he needs no more than one cola-berry, one grain of rice, one sesame seed and finally ... nothing more. His body shrivels. The villagers mock him for his gauntness, pale colour and disheveled appearance. The Bodhisattva, great in truth, realises then that this severe asceticism will not lead him to the ultimate state of knowing and clairvoyance, that will end the cycle of rebirths, ageing and death. He resumes eating. The five pupils turn away from him in complete disdain. 'The bhikshu Gautama has adopted the caressing of the senses!' And they leave Uruvela and go to Kashi. Ten girls from Uruvela, touched by his misery, offer him food made of vegetables and ghee. His body slowly recovers and gains strength and the girls call him the handsome ascetic. His colour comes back, glowing and healthy. Then, one day, the Bodhisattva looks for a bodhi-tree, an Asvatta, the tree of wisdom. Along the path that leads from the lovely river bank to the tree, the

blossoms suddenly burst forth from the trees. In the ponds, the lotuses unfold their lovely rosettes of red, white and blue. It is as if an aura shines forth from the Holy One, over earth and heavens, making the people forget all that is evil and do all that is good. Sitting cross-legged, his body upright, his face turned to the east from where the sun commences its day, he seats himself under the bodhi-tree and vows not to rise up before he has awakened to the highest state of consciousness, the everlasting salvation, the Light of the Buddha. But in the world of senses rules Mara, the evil one. The Bodhisattva knows that he will not reach the highest Light of the Buddha if he does not know also the knowledge of Mara. He lures him and Mara appears with all his hellish weapons. Yet, nothing can touch the Bodhisattva. That which is to destroy him, changes into flowers and wreaths. Mara offers him a world-power, but the Bodhisattva laughs at him. In earlier lives he has already had as much power as he wanted and sacrificed all. He has even offered his life many times before for the benefit of other beings. He calls the earth to bear witness, by touching it with his right hand. Mara sends his daughters, the most beautiful women, to tempt the Bodhisattva, but Gautama remains unmoved. Mara sends his warriors from hell one more time, to strike the Bodhisattva fatally. But the evil one and his armies prove to be merely shadows, and maya, like the reflection of the moon in the water. Mara has been conquered!

It is then that the Buddha ascends to a state where the spirit is elevated above all lust and suffering, above all the senses. At last, a three-fold knowing enters him. With his divine, clairvoyant eye, he sees all beings in their cycle of rebirths, how they descend by their evil thoughts, words and deeds, to abodes of suffering, and how, by noble thoughts, words and deeds, they ascend to heavens of light. He then sees all his previous incarnations and those of other beings, through all the ages, with their lust and pain, their noble and ignoble fates. He remembers all his previous names, incarnations and the span of his lives.

Finally, he directs his mind to the origin of suffering, and the averting of suffering. He sees how all beings are subject to births, illness, ageing and death, again and again; he still knows of no solution. He then contemplates the causes, from whence ageing and dying originate and, ever delving deeper, he finally realises that ultimately the cause is ignorance. So destroy ignorance! He comes to the four noble truths suffering⁸, the origin of suffering, the obliteration of suffering and the path that leads to the

obliteration of suffering. The Bodhisattva has discovered the highest, most sovereign Light and the three-fold knowing of the Buddha. A cry of joy resonates through all the heavenly realms: the all-knowing Buddha has risen and will pour forth showers of compassion like balm upon all beings. This is the end of suffering, of births, illness, ageing and death. But the Buddha realises that it will be hard for the people to comprehend and retain unimpaired the norm that he himself has divined; that only sages, rising above the sensual experience, can obliterate all passions, keeping Nirvana as their aim. He decides to remain silent. Saddened, the devas return to the heavens but Brahma reveals himself to the Buddha requesting him to reveal the pristine teachings to humanity. And the Buddha understands that there are many who will be lost without these teachings. Out of compassion he decides to acquiesce to Brahma's request. He travels to Kashi and there he sets in motion the Wheel of the Teachings. Seekers come to him from all over and he teaches them. For forty years he wanders through Magadha, Kosala and Videha, never thinking of anything but the good, never wanting anything but the good, never doing anything but the good. No harsh, spiteful or unfriendly word is ever spoken by him. All that he utters bears witness to his mildness and compassion for all creatures. He bade farewell to a life of luxury and pleasure, to seek the truth through deprivation and hardship. He teaches his disciples what is the right path, which leads to victory over suffering, and, ultimately, to the greatest bliss, Nirvana. There are three things that the Buddha keeps repeating: contemplation is auspicious and fruitful when it is sustained by the proper attitude to life; knowledge is auspicious and fruitful when based on right thinking; and, through such knowledge and wisdom the soul will free itself from all delusions of sinful passion and aberration.'

'Who amongst you, men and women of Tirha, wants to live as the Buddha and wishes to strive towards Nirvana, become a member of the Sangha and be compassionate towards all your fellow-creatures? He disdains no one, not the Shudra nor the Brahmin. Those who step onto the noble eight-fold path will rise to a higher realm of life and for him varna will lose all meaning.'

Kodini feels this to be offensive to Katcha. She whispers to Matali, who throws her a punch on her side and orders her to be quiet.

‘Why do you still hate another?’ continues Utanka, ‘How do you still dare to despise a widow when you harm your own karma by doing so? Set your heart on good, avoid evil, keep your thoughts pure, then you may come to the Accomplished Buddha, the Tathagata. How dare you still despise a Shudra who like you is reborn as a human being because his karma was more than that of other creatures! Not because you belong to a varna but because you are a human being, you deserve respect. Do what the Buddha teaches, have compassion for every human being, for every creature, and you are on the path to the greatest bliss. Men and women of Tirha, take your shelter in the Buddha, the Sangha and the Teachings. The Buddha does not wish to teach rigid dogma, the Buddha wants to make you aware, to change your inner view. You feel no remorse when a person next to you pines away. You have the insensible, unholy courage of evilly rejoicing when fate strikes down a poor or a sick man or a widow. You dare to humiliate and taunt one, who has lost that which is most precious in his life. But the Buddha says: ‘eternally you shall be born again’, as jackals, as snakes, in the darkness of the mahavana, as a cursed Shudra -dog, as a voiceless fish in a muddy ditch, as a beaten beast of burden in the mountains, if you do not lay to rest your harshness to all living beings, if your compassion does not force you to envelop with love those to whom life has already given so much suffering, and if you, out of compassion, do not do well towards man and animal. The Buddha wants peace and fellow-feeling towards every living being. Each act of heartlessness to whomsoever, makes you sink deeper into the bottomless quagmire of reincarnation. Compassion for a living creature, elevates you to the heavens, to the all-permeating Light of the Buddha, to Nirvana. When you have mastered your senses, and all evil, all selfishness, all craving has left you and there remains only peace, compassion, and love for man and animal, then you have attained Nirvana.’

Kunala and Kanchanamala smile understandingly at each other. Kodini is ill at ease, nervously looking all around to the residents of Tirha. They are not paying attention to her because all are attentively listening to Utanka. It is unusual for them that he does not speak of hatred and spite, of punishment and retribution, of nothing at all frightening.

At first, Diti, being somewhat dull and absent-minded, allows Utanka’s words to go over her head but then she becomes interested. Finally, when those words permeate, they are as a release in her heart. She wonders

whether she, too, can take shelter in the Buddha, the Sangha, and the Teachings.

‘Finally,’ continues Utanka, ‘when the Buddha became old, he and his followers travelled to the land of the Shakyas. With pain in his heart, he bade farewell to all that was dear to him, to Vaishali, to the mango grove that was a gift from the courtesan Ambapali, to the lovely shores of the Ganga and the Bhagavati, to the peace and quiet of the woods. His followers will live in the viharas and in the monasteries and, through their compassion, be a blessing to all living creatures. And the upasakas will sustain them. And then, in Kusinagara, in a forest of sal of the Mallas, the Buddha is about to die. The trees blossom, the air is filled with a luscious fragrance. Heaven and earth praise the Tathagata. Young disciples, lay-brothers and lay-sisters, come to show him the last honour and weep at his farewell. One last time, he turns towards his followers before he ascends into Nirvana. The earth trembles, thunder rolls in the distance, the light-glow of the Buddha reaches higher than the shimmering mountains of the Hymavant. The funeral pyre is prepared by the Mallas with the greatest of reverence, and the holy relics remaining, are divided into eight portions and given to kings and prominent families. Stupas are constructed where they can be kept so that all peoples can honour the Buddha. Now, after two hundred years, the holy Maharajah wishes to open the stupas and distribute the holy relics amongst all the stupas of India, so that everyone may receive the blessings of the holy Buddha and his teachings.⁹’

Utanka falls silent. Everyone is aware of the compassion of the holy Maharajah. Is he a follower of Buddha? His builders construct new houses for them. His granaries provide them with food. His missions are there to comfort them. His son listens as they do to Utanka. He is the sacred Maharajah Ashoka, the benefactor of his peoples, a follower of the Buddha!

A second missionary stands up. Like Utanka, Vangissa wears the ochre robe. His eyes sparkle with compassion and holy fire. Listen, listen! Diti pushes her way forward. She wants to know if she and her child are doomed or if they will be accepted in the grace and compassion of the Buddha.

‘They are heretics!’ whispers Kodini in Matali’s ear. She wants to leave the meeting but Matali thrusts her back to her place. ‘Stay, you sinner, and listen!’

Kodini, ashamed, sinks back to her sitting position. She gets angry when Diti moves to a place closer to Utanka.

‘Look at the slut!’ Matali grabs her arm.

‘Be quiet or I shall flog your back! The other monk is speaking. Be quiet!’

‘One day you must die,’ begins Vangissa, ‘as sure as Surya vanishes tonight behind the Himalayas. But as inevitably as Surya rises again in the morning, will you be reborn, to die again, and to be born again, and for all eternity! The Buddha, in infinite compassion, has shown the way to escape this terrible cycle. The Tathagata, in each incarnation and in each new life, always had before his eyes the great aim of preparing himself for his noble calling, he wished to be the saviour of the world. And he understood each human being, each animal, each deity, because as a Bodhisattva, he himself had, in an endless line of rebirths, relived and experienced and looked through the good and the evil, the joy and the pain! When the holy one came to complete wisdom under the bodhi-tree he remembered all his previous lives of centuries long past. He told his disciples of many, to teach them, and to point them the sacred way. Tomorrow evening I will tell you the Jataka, of his last incarnation before he became the Buddha. Come back here tomorrow.’

But the people of Tirha linger on. They walk up to Utanka and ask if everyone can become a follower of Buddha. They ask if they must bring great offerings and perform more rituals; they ask if they must become a bhikshu in order to serve Buddha. The bhikshus answer them with great willingness and kindness until, finally, the night ends their gathering and all return to their huts.

The next day an army troop arrives with Tulya. A high purusha will conduct the judicial case. While a number of soldiers set up a campsite on the open space, a few are sent to Matali to fetch Diti. There is uproar in the entire village, as everyone wants to know what is going on. Diti is treated respectfully, causing surprise. The villagers are permitted into the camp. The Yuvaraja is also present to act as Judge. This especially inspires confidence in Diti. Utanka is to be the third Judge.

‘Come closer. You are Diti, the widow of Matali’s son?’

‘Yes,’ Diti replies, blushing. After all, she is used to being maligned with the name ‘widow’.

‘Did your late husband’s mother send you to a hunter’s camp with a message for Kawi?’

‘Yes.’ Diti starts crying at the memory.

‘Why did you not refuse, Diti?’

‘I did refuse Lord, but mother Kodini and the brahmacharin Katcha forced me to go. As a widow without sons, I have to obey. I asked a neighbour to take the message and he refused.’

The purusha continues with compassion in his voice: ‘In the camp, you were treated shamefully. And it is Tulya, especially, who has roused wrath in the sacred Maharajah. He would have received a horrifying punishment but he begged the gracious Maharajah for forgiveness and said that he wished to make amends for his evil deed. He wishes to take you as his lawful wife. His marriage would then be regarded as a gandarva-marriage, which is lawful. You are free to accept or reject Tulya’s offer. Tulya will, if you agree, receive and work on land given to him by the Maharajah. Come, Tulya, swear to protect her if Diti accepts your offer.’

Diti is startled as Tulya, who was standing at the back, comes close.

‘I swear that I will honour her, my whole life and keep suffering far from her as much as I can, Lord.’

‘Diti, do you wish to become Tulya’s wife?’

Diti looks shyly and nervously from one man to the other. Tulya had changed from his untidy hunter’s garb to a new Vaishya-robe. He had his hair cut and his beard shaved, according to the wishes of the purusha. Yet, Diti shudders as she sees the one who violated her chastity now standing meekly in front of her. He wishes to restore to her—the despised widow—honour and dignity. She would become the wife of a rich man and will no longer be treated with disdain. Tulya would protect her. She would be released from Kodini and Upamatali’s scorn. She would follow the hunter, Tulya, who had first brought shame upon her. She remembers what happened: She had begged him to let her go, she scratched, hit, to resist the brute; and all was in vain! But she had promised to remain true to Yasa! Those who desire good, detest evil and keep their thoughts pure, will be able to live in the viharas and be a blessing for all beings! Even women! That is what Utanka had said. Therein she sees the deliverance from her difficult life.

‘No! I wish to remain true to Yasa, Matali’s son!’ she cries from the depths of her distressed soul. There is only silence around her. The judges do not say anything. The villagers of Tirha stare straight ahead. They

despised Diti, but her steadfast loyalty to Yasa suddenly elevates her above their plain lives. She is choosing loyalty to her deceased husband over safety and protection by the father of her child. They feel this to be honourable, like each sacrifice and each renunciation of natural desires. Many have passed by the widow in disdain, but this display of loyalty moves them.

‘Know well what you are doing, Diti,’ the purusha says to her earnestly. ‘Tulya wants to make amends for the vile thing he has done. He wants to devote himself to you and your child, and you can be his support on the new path. That will increase your karma.’

But Diti is certain. ‘Lord, Yasa is my husband.’ She looks at Utanka. ‘I want to do good, renounce evil, keep my thoughts pure, holy Utanka!’

The purusha then decrees: ‘You, Tulya, are free. The holy Maharajah has so ordered. Go! Be warned, do not stand again before his judges!’

Tulya drops to his knees.

‘Thank you, noble purusha.’ Then he suddenly turns to Diti. ‘Take me, Diti! Come with me. Your son shall be a rich Vaishya. I am young and strong and will keep all evil away from your house. The holy Maharajah will be satisfied with me. Do it, Diti!’

‘No. Yasa ...’

‘I no longer wish to be a hunter. I have firmly resolved to take care of you and pay for my wickedness.’

‘Go the way of the Buddha,’ she says softly.

Tulya bows his head. He wants to leave but does not know to where. He turns towards the road to the hunter’s camp, stands still, turns back, and runs off towards Kunala’s soldiers camp. A few guards see him coming. They have brought him from Pataliputra.

‘Where is your wife, Tulya?’ they ask.

He ignores the mockery and asks earnestly: ‘Is the captain here?’

‘No, he had gone to the judging. Come back later.’

Tulya sits down by the side of the road and waits, deep disappointment stamped on him. When Kunala and Kappa finally return, Tulya stands up. The Yuvaraja calls a halt and asks kindly: ‘What do you want, Tulya?’

‘I would like to become a soldier of the holy Maharajah, Lord.’

‘Not a bhikshu, as Diti suggested?’

‘No, Lord. I am a hunter from the mahavana. From the time of my tender youth I lived in danger, wandered on the elephant paths. I can fight with wild animals, and also work. But bhikshu? To walk around with a begging bowl, or remain silent and thinking, I cannot!’

‘Is catching elephants, dangerous work?’ asks Kunala, interested.

‘Not if one stays out of reach of their trunks and feet, Lord.’

‘How do you catch them then, Tulya?’

‘Drive them into a trap with much noise. Or, wound them from a tree. In their rage they run towards you, while you lure them further. But the animals become enraged and ...’ He turns silent.

‘And destroy everything on their path! Dwellings and whole villages!’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Kawi and his hunters have fled. Can you find them?’

‘No, Lord.’

‘You may take a number of soldiers with you.’

‘No, Lord, we will not find them.’

‘Because you do not want to?’

‘Lord, I am no longer a hunter but I cannot betray them.’

‘Even though they have committed crimes?’

‘Even though, Lord.’ Kunala pauses a moment and looks at the strong, young figure. Disappointed, Tulya steps back.

‘Go tonight and listen to the bhikshus in Tirha. Come tomorrow and tell me if you wish to become a monk or my guard.’ The troop moves on and leaves Tulya standing. He barely understands what the Prince had meant. He, Tulya, become a monk when he can become a guard for the Yuvaraja? He has to laugh! Still he attends Ashoka’s mission in the evening. All the villagers of Tirha have settled themselves in an orderly group, sitting cross-legged around the speakers in front of the tent of the bhikshus. Vangissa stands before them, his hands raised to his chest. He looks around calmly: How can he touch the souls of these simple people who are caught in the offering-ceremonies of the Brahmins and in their cruel superstitions? He knows hundreds of the Bodhisattva’s jatakas: how the Lord lived and struggled from birth to rebirth, in ages long gone by, in various shapes.

And Vangissa tells the deeply moving story of Buddha’s next to last incarnation, the jataka of Vessantara who, out of compassion, gave away his

holy elephant, horses, children and even his wife, and finally, after unbearable sorrows, was restored to his dignity.

The impression that this story made upon the simple villagers of Tirha was overwhelming. With their great sensitivity to the needs of children and marital relationships, they are in complete empathy with Vessantara's family. When the royal family goes into exile, some of them could barely contain their sobbing; when the children are spirited away by the insensitive Brahmin, many allow their tears to run freely. When even Devi is taken away from him and Vessantara, bereft of all that is dear to him, remains behind in the woods in deep sorrow, sadness overcomes all the people of Tirha. But they rejoice loudly when *Sakra*¹⁰ rewards sacred virtue in the most bounteous way. They stand up, laugh, cheer, hasten to their simple homes and fetch lamps that they fill with oil, and light them in pure joy. And they let them shine over the place where the preachers are camped. Even Kodini could not hide her emotions and embraces Upamatali. Diti had already pushed forward close to Utanka, as if expecting salvation from him. The others have respectfully yielded to her and let her go. She sheds no tears but her eyes are filled with veneration as she looks at Vangissa. Where the others were carried away by the calamities that befell Vessantara and the happiness that he eventually found, Diti was struck by the penance of the Bodhisattva, who, despite his unbearable sadness, practised his *paramita*¹¹ and completed his difficult task to the bitter end.

Utanka stands up: 'That was the life of the Bodhisattva. When Vessantara died he went to the Tushita-heaven, and he was reborn just once more to become the Buddha and to save all people from their errors, to show them the way out of the maze of rebirths to the salvation in Nirvana.

'Do you also want to take the first step on his path? Do you wish to alter your attitudes, nurture your compassion for every person, every animal, walk the way of the Buddha? Then set your hearts on good, avoid evil and keep your thoughts pure. Lift up your hearts, come out of your shelter, turn towards the Buddha, the Dharma; throw down the Lord of death, like the elephant does the reed hut. Those who live thus will escape the wheel of births and put an end to suffering. Take your refuge in the Buddha.'

Diti approaches the bhikshu in great excitement, and raises her folded hands to her forehead.

'Lord, can I too, go to the vihara for women?'

‘The Tathagata is full of compassion for you, Diti. He approves of a woman like you being accepted. First, you must raise your child until it comes of age. The Buddha wants that there will be a bhikhuni appointed, to be of help to you. Afterwards, you can be inducted as a bhikhuni and receive the upasampada ordination. We shall say that you request Veluvana as your home. I know that the holy Maharajah will be your intercessor.’

‘Come along with the entourage to Pataliputra, Diti,’ says Kunala.

‘Come to father’s house, Diti, to prepare yourself,’ Kancha adds helpfully.

The royal family, along with Diti, leaves for the camp. To the great astonishment of the people present, she rides on one of the elephants ...

In a simple ceremony, the purusha and Utanka join Kunala and Kanchanamala in marriage the following day. Santanu and a couple of Brahmins tend to the offerings which he considers necessary for the happiness of his daughter. Diti becomes Kancha’s chief servant, Tulya, Kunala’s guard. The journey to Pataliputra soon commences under the protection of a heavy guard. Utanka and his helpers continue to work for the well-being of the people. Almost all choose the side of the Buddha and delve deeper into the teachings of love. Their diligence grows: they want to establish a vihara for the monks. Ashoka orders his foreman to build a fine monastery near Tirha, around which they will build the simple huts, leaning against the great vihara, from where the beautiful doctrine of the Tathagata will spread its wings over those who still live in the ruthlessness of the Will of nature.



THE YOUNGEST RANI

Like a red fireball the sun plunges down in the west and touches the high waters of the Ganga. Ashoka stands alone in the far corner of the park, his gaze wandering over the wide river and the green land into the distant horizon. He longs for Kunala who lingers on the banks of the Bhagvati. Kanchanamala? He, Ashoka, should be happy that his son is beginning to feel more independent and, in his love for the young Brahmin girl, is less mindful of his strong attachment to him. He, too, desires it so! How else will the Prince find the strength for the great task that awaits him? One day, he, Ashoka, will set—like the fireball yonder—behind the end-poles of the world. Then Kunala will have to lead the peoples further on the path of the Buddha. Is he capable of doing so? Neither Jalauka nor Karuvaki's son, Tivara, will become Maharajah.

The sun has disappeared and he walks back in the twilight. It is time to receive his informers who in a continuous flow, day in day out, come from the farthest corners of his limitless empire to apprise him about everything he needs to know: A raft that departed from Chuny a few months ago with the first of the giant pillars for Buddha's birthplace, and has been drifting down the Jamuna and then the Ganga, has entered the Sarayu, nearing Kapilavasthu. Four thousand soldiers are needed to transport the gigantic work of art across the countryside to its destination. In Sanchi, too, an

Ashoka pillar with lion-capital has arrived for the great Stupa. There, Devi became his consort and their happiness blossomed. He sacrificed her love for the great empire of his Father. Other women were forced upon him, women whom he accepted for the good of the country and whom he learned to regard with esteem and love, like Asandhi. He has grown older, less susceptible to womanly charm.

The Rajuka of Ambi has died. Obstinate he refused to take refuge in the Buddha. Yet, he was an upright governor. Now one of the most capable Buddhist employees will take his place.

Mathura, wishing to build a huge monastery that will look out over the Doab, seeks the support of the holy Maharajah. Tomorrow he will organise the task but at the same time he wants to build an abbey for nuns there; he will call it The Madri Abbey.

There is famine in Dakshina in the Deccan. For two years now the rain god has withheld the heavenly milk. Ashoka decrees that grain, rice and dried fruits are to be sent from his granaries. Simultaneously he dispatches a number of officers to Kalyani, all of them experts in water irrigation. Do not the rivers bring vast quantities of water from the mountains in the west? It is easy to blame the rain god and then to huddle around the sacred fires. He will force the inhabitants to dig beneficial irrigation-canals which will put an end to the ever-recurrent famine.

The great road from Hastinapura to Visapura is dangerous because of thugs who pillage caravans and pilgrims. Ashoka orders the dispatch of a large body of troops to exterminate the bandits or to punish them. He then orders the digging of wells by road-crews and the construction of rest houses along the trunk road.

An emissary from Tirha informs him that the Yuvaraja, along with his royal consort, are on their way to Pataliputra. Ashoka can hardly contain his happiness.

‘When will he arrive in Pataliputra?’

‘In three days, noble Maharajah.’

After all the informers have been heard, Ashoka goes to Asandhi. The physicians have prescribed rest and herbal extracts to relieve her headaches and fatigue.

‘In three days, Kunala will return from Tirha.’

‘Two more happy ones in India, my Raja.’

‘I will go to Vaishali to welcome the heir to the throne and his young wife. And I would like the Agramahisi to accompany me on the royal elephant so that the population of the holy city of Vaishali will know how highly I esteem Kunala.’

‘Was the Yuvaraja Ashoka also welcomed like this in those early days?’

Ashoka smiles. ‘The people did not regard me highly and I was no Yuvaraja. They feared the Wild Prince more than they revered him.’

‘And has Maharajah Ashoka needed that tribute?’

Ashoka sits close to Asandhimitra.

‘They did not know that a beautiful young Brahmin lady from the Sarayu would come to tie a delicate-blue scarf around the eyes of the Wild Prince.’

Asandhi places her hand on his arm. ‘Does Kunala need your support? It is in everyone’s interest that the most beloved son of Ashoka will ascend the ivory throne after you.’

‘The welfare and prosperity of my subjects will depend on my successor.’

‘Thus, on the fragile existence of a single human being? Bindusara relied upon his armies.’

‘I trust in Dharma which means not ruling through fear but through a change in the inner attitude and outlook of all peoples, Asandhi.’

‘You began in the domain of trishna, my Piyadasi, and you have pressed on until you found the way of the Buddha. You have guided Kunala from his birth onwards towards the path of the Buddha. Where will he stop? The older I grow, the more my fear grows at the vulnerability of your empire. The older you grow, the more does your faith grow in the sufficiency of your measures. You can be the benefactor of the Sangha because you are a powerful man. Will Kunala also be one, and his son? Only one weak ruler and the peoples who still live in trishna will be at the borders of India. There ought to be harmony between the great compassion and the defence of what has been gained so nobly throughout the years. Both have the right to exist.’

‘The, entire humanity has to come to the Buddha, abandoning war in pursuit of compassion.’

‘Then you do not take into account the trishna that lives and will live inside each human being. There has to be a harmonious balance between all

the powers which work in the world. A nation that does not wish to adapt to being humane has to be forced, if necessary through power. You do not tolerate when beasts of prey snatch people away from their hamlets. Why do you have hunters? If your mighty empire should become weak, do you not fear the Iranians, the Macedonians and those powers that lie beyond the Himalayas?’

‘It is better to first bring the Buddha into the world.’

Asandhi reflects for a while on Ashoka’s words. Then she says warmly, ‘You are so noble in your ambitions my King, that, unfortunately, the people will not understand you for centuries to come!’

‘Are you accompanying me to Vaishali, my Asandhi?’

‘My health does not allow me. Take Tishya with you. You neglect her, my Raja.’

‘I took her into the harem. It does not mean that I wish to place her in precedence.’

‘I love Tishya Rakshita very much, she rouses pity in me and it would distress me if you were to hold her in scorn or put her aside. She is as much a Rani as us and has endured more than us.’

Ashoka reflects for a while. ‘Inform your friend that she may accompany me, to bring Kunala from Vaishali. Mogali Tissa awaits me.’

Asandhi embraces him happily. The Maharajah leaves for his working quarters. A little later the master of the Sangha appears, And Ashoka leads the venerable old monk to the seat of honour opposite him.

Tissa has completed his great work: The Council of a thousand serious and capable men of acumen have established the Doctrine and the rules of the order, according to their inner conscience, absorbing them into their minds and hearts. No heretical thoughts will be tolerated any more. Ashoka sends the lipis with the decisions to all the monasteries and at Bhabra has immortalised in stone what Tissa has accomplished so mightily. The Maharajah can choose for his Dharma-mahamatras and his missions to foreign countries out of a thousand bhikshus who will convey Buddha’s doctrine and Ashoka’s justice to the people.

‘And Mahindra, my Tissa?’

Tissa is moved by the fate of Ashoka’s eldest son. It is strange that this Princely being does not seem destined to live for the welfare of all, like his great father.

‘Mahindra!’ he says, ruminating. ‘He is the earnestness of earnestness, the truth of the truth, the purity of the purity. When his melodious voice recites the sutras it is as if a glow of the Buddha emanates from the Vihara or the clear sound of the Doctrine blends with the chorus of the monks, as if the inspiration of Buddha’s sermons—as it touched the people of Magadha and Videha—takes possession of the assembly; as though the immortal echo of Buddha’s spirit traverses through all our spirits and makes aware the eternal bond between all that lives. It is as though all are lifted up towards the Tathagata, as though a will unfolds that is stronger than all that trishna animates. What can his life bring to us yet?’

‘In Lanka, the old king Mutasiva will soon die. I heard that the young Yuvaraja Tissya adopted my name, Devanampiya, out of respect for our work. I will dispatch a mission to his kingdom. Will Mahindra be able to lead this?’

‘His understanding of the Doctrine is exceptional; his zeal for the Tathagata is indefatigable. He will convey the Buddha to Lanka, pure and authentic,’ Tissa delightedly expressed his thoughts.

‘You will determine, holy Tissa, who is to accompany him.’

The following day Ashoka summons Mahindra.

‘You wish to speak to me, my Father?’

‘What is your aim in life, my eldest born?’

‘I want to be a good sramana of the Buddha; Buddha’s disciple, nothing more, and ripen to Nirvana. Only that I see as my highest happiness.’

‘The Buddha worked for forty years before he ascended Nirvana.’

‘I shall work till it opens for me,’ smiled Mahindra.

‘I wish to send a mission to Lanka to bring the Buddha to the kingdom of the young King Devanampiya Tissa. The old king will die soon and Tissya is an admirer of my work in India. Do you wish to be the holy one who will take this exalted task upon himself?’

‘I will be happy if you consider me capable of this task.’

‘Very well, it is the work of a lifetime. Before you accept it, bid farewell to your mother in Vidisha.’

‘As a bhikshu, I am not allowed anymore to live under the same roof with Mother.’

‘She will provide another shelter for you, close to her.’

‘Thank you, my Father.’

While Ashoka crosses the Ganga along with a magnificently attired body of troops who will accompany him on the road to Vaishali, Mahindra departs to Sanchi, passing by the side of Bodh Gaya along the Ashoka road, to bid a last farewell to his mother.

Tishya Rakshita is seated by the side of the Maharajah on the royal elephant. Ashoka is deep in thought most of the time. The unending fertile fields of paddy and millet, interspersed with luscious mango groves, banyan trees and prosperous hamlets, whose inhabitants kneel along the road in deference as the royal entourage passes – all this impresses the Rani who has been cloistered in Pataliputra for so many years.

And while Ashoka is musing on the destiny of his sons and of his empire, she is rejoicing in the picturesque journey and in her high dignity. The veneration by the Vaishyas and the Shudras are also meant for her. Her beauty and her place on the royal elephant must be impressive. Why then does the Maharajah take so little notice of her? Is it because she had been a waiting-maid? But she is a Kshatriya, like Rani Padmavathi, like Rani Karuvaki! She cannot understand his distant bearing. In the past, he has shown some pleasure in her, included her in his discussions with Rani Asandhimitra. Yet, she hardly dares to disturb him. Does he think about the Agramahisi? She is old and withered while she herself is young and in full bloom! Or, is the Agramahisi the only one with whom he can talk on matters that keep him busy? Is she not the most recently chosen Rani? It disturbs her that he says nothing at all to her. His un-comely face has for a long time been turned away from her since he is looking straight ahead towards the paddy fields and the woods, bathing in the light of the gleaming sun.

‘Did I give the Maharajah a cause for displeasure?’

Ashoka turns to her, amazed. His great, friendly eyes look at her in surprise.

‘Certainly not, my Rani. Might I be permitted that even while on a journey, I reflect on matters of the State which will not be of interest to you.’ He smiles at her.

‘But are you not on your way to Vaishali to welcome your most beloved son, and your daughter-in-law whom you do not know yet, gracious Maharajah?’

‘I will have to control my impatience for two more days, Tishya Rakshita. I need time. A thousand cases are always waiting for my decisions when I have dealt with a hundred.’

‘So, I have disturbed my Lord in his reflections.’

Ashoka notices the disappointment of his youngest Rani. Within her heart the Kshatriya is insulted: he does not seem to consider her worthy enough to talk to. He cannot charm her, especially not because he is so totally engrossed in his work of governance and Buddhism. They say that he spends the largest portion of the tremendous revenue on stupas, viharas, gifts for the priests and the monks, beautiful statues and pillars. Asandhimitra is like him. But she, Tishya, is different! She would like to accompany him to the camp of the warriors, join him travelling in front on mighty elephants, war chariots, to ride on horses and race through the woods and the hunting grounds. Asandhi has told her, ‘The Maharajah does not like that.’ Now, even on the very first day, the journey is already becoming tedious and her consort seems hardly aware of the presence of his youngest Rani.

‘No, you did not disturb me, my Rani. But you should never forget that the interests of the peoples come first before everything else, even before the pleasure that a beautiful young Rani can offer.’ He smiles, and his smile radiates the wonderful eyes of the mighty ruler.

‘Forgive me, Gracious Majesty. I know beauty and youth soon wither away but the interests of the peoples remain forever.’

These words she has often heard from Asandhi. She surprises Ashoka.

‘Mostly, it is my son who occupies my thoughts, Tishya, his wedding and the hope that soon there will be sons born to the Yuvaraja, so that the Mauryas can continue my work.’

Ashoka observes the happy laugh that lights up her beautiful features. It is joy over her victory; the Maharajah reveals to her his thoughts.

‘You have more sons, Sire.’

‘But the Wheel of Buddha’s Doctrine has to keep rolling over the earth, Tishya. Fortunately, Kunala thinks like me.’

‘And if Yama were to take him inopportunely to his realm?’

‘Devanampiya! The gods have supported me in my endeavours and it has become a blessing for India. Why would they take away Kunala who would, just like me, work for the happiness of all his subjects in this land?’

The possibility that he may lose his life is so much less than mine was during my own youth. I found a country in chaos whereas his will be orderly, prosperous and happy. Kunala has, besides his vision, the strength of the Mauryas. I wish Kanchanamala to be of support to him, just like ...' He pauses and keeps silent.

'But you have more sons, gracious Maharajah, and maybe there will be more bestowed upon you. Who will succeed?'

'The Maharajah decides upon his successor. And Kunala has all the qualities which I judge as necessary for it. What does a son I do not yet have mean to me, my Rani! But see, yonder along our way is a rest house. We will refresh and fortify ourselves for the journey ahead.'

Slaves, sent ahead, have prepared a simple meal accompanied by refreshing fruits and drinks. Occasionally a courier brings messages, on which the Maharajah takes instant decisions. Tishya could hardly bear that she is being kept out of everything which he used to discuss with Asandhimitra.

When they receive the message that the Maharajah is nearing Vaishali, Kunala and Kanchanamala ride out to meet him. For father and son, it is a pure, unalloyed joy of re-union. Ashoka rides with Kanchanamala, and Kunala with Tishya Rakshita, back to the city.

The Yuvaraja is overjoyed with his stay in the mahavana and Tishya looks up with admiration at the young Raja who does not get tired of telling the new Maharani about the hermitage, Tirha, the elephant-attack, and the young Rani.

'How fortunate is she that she was allowed to spend her youth in the mahavana!'

'Is that more fortunate, mother Tishya, than life under Ashoka?'

'If one, born in the freedom of the forest, can shiver at the storms passing by after dew-time, or feel the storms which come with the rains like a feast, then one scorns life in the big city, where bhikshus and Brahmins are colouring the roads.'

Kunala looks surprised at her with his thoughtful eyes.

'Why did mother Tishya choose the capital?'

'Choose?' A sudden flush sweeps over her features. 'My brave father and brother were slain by the soldiers of the Maharajah, I was carried away

to Pataliputra!’ Her eyes dart swiftly towards the city of Vaishali. ‘According to the Maharajah, the Buddha considered the city yonder, with its mango groves, the garden of Ambapali and the wealthy houses and temples, as one of the most beautiful of Magadha and Videha. In my memory, I picture my father’s realm as an earthly heaven.’

‘It is sad that many do not realise that a mongoose can fight a snake but not an elephant.’

‘My father was a proud Kshatriya who preferred death to a life stripped of freedom!’

‘My father has honoured him by elevating his daughter as a Rani in his anthapura,’ he answers calmly.

Tishya keeps silent. Can she tell him that it was because of the goodness—or weakness—of the Agramahisi, that she was charitably accepted into the anthapura? If the Emperor had wanted to honour her then he should have given her as a wife to the young Yuvaraja who is now taking along his radiant bride to the capital! She, Tishya, is merely the such-and-such Rani of an old man who is cogitating about the affairs of state and the growth of a bloodless Buddhism and the interests of those numerous drag-rob¹es of the Ashokarama and feels not a whit about the needs of a young Kshatriya. She may delight in the accolades meant for him, and sit, richly dressed, beside him inside a golden howdah! By his side! When all she wants is to race on horseback beside the young Yuvaraja! Every now and then her eyes dart to the eyes of the slender figure beside her, eyes behind which lies a world of mysteries. She is as young as Kanchanamala and she is well aware that she is more beautiful, more courageous, and wilder than the daughter of the learned Brahmin in the forgotten mahavana. Kanchanamala will be wise like the Agramahisi and soothe her husband into piety and compassion. Chandragupta and Bindusara were fighters for power. They attempt to wrap in a yellow robe the warrior who lies hidden within the Maharajah! And the Agramahisi acquiesces approvingly. Will Kanchanamala support the Yuvaraja as a warrior or as a disciple of the Buddha? Daughter of a learned Brahmin! Hermit! She, Tishya Rakshita, is chained to the elderly lover of the Buddha!

‘And do you long for the training fields of the warriors on the banks of the Son?’ Her voice is rising and her gaze penetrate his beautiful eyes. Her youth goes out to the handsome young man who represents a life of grandeur and power.

Kunala smiles. 'That is not what attracts me the most, mother Tishya. I longed for my father who values warfare to be the least of his many occupations.'

'War is the support of every kingdom against his enemies.'

'Father has no enemies anymore.'

'Beyond his empire live belligerent peoples.'

'Our army is still very strong.'

'So, you do still have faith in your warriors. I am glad to hear that.' She sighs as though a burden has been cast off. 'I would not feel safe in an empire that is without an army. India is an attractive country, my Kunala. How do you hope to protect its riches and its wealth without an army? What if wild hordes invade the countries and cast their covetous eyes on beautiful cities like Vaishali? See how the Hiranyavati winds herself around its ramparts. How lovely shelter the colourful houses in the shadows of the palms, the arecas, the banyans and the asvathas.'

'But Father conquers the kings with Dharma instead of arms. That is more just and more humane!'

'It is better to make the assailant of an alien country bear the brunt of the heavy blow of the sword of war than to sit down in pious impotence.'

'You might be right, mother Tishya, if Buddha's compassion does not come to rule the world.'

'So, until then!'

'Until then.'

Kunala thinks of the discussion he had with his father before his departure to Tirha. In the peaceful surroundings of the hermitage, by the side of the gurgling Bhagavati and the chatting with Kanchanamala, he has somehow forgotten that he will be made responsible one day for the welfare of the peoples. Will he then increase the powers of the army, strengthen his borders? Or, will he, like Father, spread the power of the Dharma over the world? He is inclined towards Father's benign faith in humanity; every so often, though, a fear wells up about the far-off enemies who could become a danger for India when the Mauryan empire, because of compassion and humanity, is shorn of resistance.

They have drawn near to Vaishali. Everywhere on the roadside the inhabitants, dressed in bright white and red clothes, stand as close as possible to gaze at the holy Maharajah and his family and to pay their

respects. In front of the former royal palace of the Mallas, awaits the head of the city of Vaishali, along with many city officials. In the streets all the stones, sand and dirt, have been picked clear, and sandal water has been sprayed, while sweet-smelling herbs are burning in precious braziers. Garlands of the most beautiful flowers are hung along the streets and banners of colourful silks adorn high poles, like bright patches of light in the brighter sunlight. When the Emperor's retinue appears, all get down on their knees and bow their heads to the ground. The royal procession proceeds towards the garden that the courtesan Ambapali gifted to the Buddha. It is here that one takes respite to recover from a weary journey.



BUDDHA'S MIGHTY WORD

The glittering cavalcades of the Emperor are always accompanied by the purohita so that religious life will not be neglected. It is thus that the monk Sagatha has proceeded along to Vaishali. At nightfall, when the last rays of the sun converge in a red glow over the Hiranyavati and the nearly full-blown moon looms above the mango trees in the grove, a silence sinks down over the beautiful garden of Ambapali. At this time all congregate around the purohita who, dressed in his ochre robe, stands at the base of the Bodhi tree which gives every grove of the Buddha its sanctity. Seats are placed for Ashoka, the Yuvaraja, and the Ranis. Others are squatting on cushions that have been placed all around the tree. Everyone—servants, mahouts, and grooms—takes part in the simple ceremony, a sacred veneration of the holy Master through his words. Diti sits behind her mistress. This day, she has gone along with Kanchanamala to the Emperor and Kancha has said: ‘This is Diti, my Father, who wishes to become a member of the Sangha when she takes leave of me.’ And the Emperor greets Diti, who had been kneeling down, and says quite simply: ‘Get up, Diti, any one who has suffered like you because of compliance to her mother, deserves to be taken under the wing of a beautiful and good mistress like Kanchanamala.’ And she listens to the homily of the purohita. She looks on with timid bashfulness at the wondrous world around her

where everyone welcomes her warmly. Back home she would not have taken the risk of looking at her fellow-villagers. Here she finds peace, goodness, and respect for the human being. Do all of them have the compassion of the Buddha about which Utanka had spoken? 'By our own efforts are we purified!' She wished to be like these people! Sagata's dark and sonorous voice strikes a chord.

'We wish to offer our worship to the Buddha, the Tathagata.' Men and women-servants come up, their arms full of flowers, some white like the snow peaks of the Hymavanta, others red as the glow of the setting sun or blue like the clear sky. Sagata arranges them lovingly at the base of the Bodhi tree. He then sprinkles sandal powder all around the trunk of the tree; they are offerings to the Buddha.

'Sweet is the fragrance of the flowers and the sandal offered to the Bhagwan, the Exalted One. Tomorrow the flowers will wither away and the sandal powder shall fade but its fragrance will float up to the heavens, conveyed by your love and your worship of the Buddha. Through his mighty word, he will awaken your compassion in this gathering under the sacred Bodhi tree! The Buddha be praised!'

The monk Sagata starts the tales.

'Jeeva, Jeeva, my darling', Moans are heard through the woods. It is Ubbiri who has just lost her daughter. The Buddha hears the grief-stricken lamentations of the mother for her child. 'Jeeva, Jeeva!' Compassion for all who suffer suffuses the Supreme One. All that becomes, perishes, and all that is born must die. How can a mother like Ubbiri who has lost her most precious treasure be consoled? 'Calm yourself, Ubbiri. Regain your composure, Ubbiri. Thousands of women have been committed to the flames in this place and have died here, just like your child. Eighty-four were called Jeeva. For which Jeeva are you mourning, Ubbiri?' The mighty word of the Tathagata softly resounds. Ubbiri suddenly falls silent ... Eighty-four mothers, all of whom have lost their beloved Jeevas! And she is moaning as though she is the only one being tormented by grief! It is then that she becomes aware of the suffering pervading the world. She seeks refuge in the consoling one, the Buddha, who wants to alleviate the suffering of mankind.

Once upon a time the Tathagata sojourned in Savatthi, in the Jetavana, the sacred grove that was gifted to the Buddha by Ananthapindika. In those

days, Kishagotami wandered about in despair. In her arms she carried her dead child. She was nearing madness. How can she recall her child to life, revive her! She hears about the great Holy One of Kapilavastu who performs many miracles. To him she wants to go. She seeks her way to the place where the Buddha and his disciples immerse themselves in the teachings. Ananda asks what she wants. Choked with emotion, she holds out her little dead child. Ananda, compassionate like the Buddha, allows her to come to the Tataghata. Reverently, she sinks to her knees, stretches out her arms with the limp body to the Exalted One. 'Lord, my child is dead. Give back her life!' she bursts out, weeping.

'All life is doomed to die, Kishagotami. It is the eternal law.'

'You perform miracles, Lord. Bestow my child back to me, so that it will live and laugh once again.'

What solace can he offer Kishagotami! ... His mighty word!

'So be it, Kishagotami. I will call your child back to life if you bring me a mustard seed from a house in which no one has ever died.'

Filled with new hope, Kishagotami goes from house to house. 'Has death ever taken anyone here?'

'Death? My forefathers died, my parents, brothers, sisters, children ...' Kishagotami moves hastily on to another house.

'Has anyone ever died in this house?'

'Oh, certainly, yes! My ...' Kishagotami hurries on. Till nightfall, her anxious question is heard, and till nightfall the answer is an affirmation. The further she goes, the more aware she grows of the truth and its comfort, of the universality of death. Only then is she able to let go of her child, and she turns towards the Buddha, the Teachings and the Sangha.

In the days when Bimbisara was the king of Magadha, the Buddha resided in the Jetavana, the bamboo grove in Rajgriha. Pestilence, famine and death were reigning in Magadha. Nanda's birth pains have begun. Her husband, sons, daughter, her father and mother, have all fallen prey to the terrible sickness and she is giving birth to a child, a new life. Nothing binds her any longer to life but the child. She is fleeing away from her birthplace. She hates the burning sun that scorches the fields, the woods that offers no shelter, the people wandering in desperation along the roads, the penitents, tormenting themselves as if life was not tormenting enough. Onwards she goes, wanting to avoid the black-death and the confusing people. Then she

arrives at Rajgriha, at the site of the Buddha's sojourn. They say he has conquered death. Rebelliously, she goes to the Shakyamuni. She wants to meet the one who is said to console where no consolation exists anymore. As she enters the Jetavana, she mocks his solace.

'Let her in, Ananda. Whosoever mocks solace is in need of it.'

In spite of being struck by the Buddha's presence, Nanda bursts out: 'Are you the Buddha!' The Tataghata nods.

'Have you conquered death? It is a lie! Among us death is as alive as the sun! Everyone has been taken away from me! Except this child! What is it that you have conquered!' she demands scornfully. 'Why do people take their refuge in you, in your Teachings, in your Sangha, when death rages in this country?'

'Have you fear of death, Nanda?'

She looks at him indignantly. 'Have you no fear of death?'

'Have you a fear of growing old, Nanda?'

'Have you no fear of growing old!' She demands more fiercely.

'Have you a fear of sickness, Nanda?'

'Have you no fear of pestilence!' her features redden with rage.

'Then, you fear the three messengers that the gods send every day to all that lives, Nanda, to warn you that all life is doomed to die because it has become. Have you fear, too, that all your loved ones have not enhanced their karma? And will be born again and die again, again and again? Do you avoid all that is wrong and do you do all that is good, do you keep your thoughts pure, Nanda? You keep silent. When your loved ones have been faithful to these three precepts, they will not be reborn again and thus not die again. Then have they overcome death. When you pursue these precepts with your heart, then you too will master death and death will touch you no more.'

'And if they ... did not follow them, Lord?' Nanda kneels down.

'Then, they will be reborn because their karma has not yet been ameliorated. If they had, then they would have forfeited the struggle against old age, sickness and death, Nanda. Although he had been wrongly accused of having an unrighteous alliance with a queen, Anu, the brother of King Tissa of Kalyani, was condemned to be cast into a vat containing boiling oil. Yet, he had received nothing but the reward for his karma. For in an earlier life, he had cast into boiling milk a fly that was still alive. His inner

attitude was wrong, Nanda. For he who does not veer away from wrongdoing and does not do that which is good, nor keeps his thoughts pure, surrenders forever to death ... he has lost the battle with death, Nanda.'

At that, Nanda becomes aware of the limitless compassion of the Buddha's mighty word, and she takes refuge in the Tataghata ...

Bikkhuni Sundari enters the forest to meditate on what the Tataghata has taught. She is a beautiful woman who has forsworn all that the will to live reposes in human nature, riches, luxury, comforts, joys ... She has turned to the Buddha and is no longer open to what would distract her from the Buddha's teachings. She feels purity, has clarity in her faith and her life, and she meditates on the truth and the greatness of the Buddha's sacred doctrine. She sits under a Bodhi tree and meditates ... She looks on. She is clear about what man has to undertake to escape *samsara*, or rebirth. All that used to be significant to her, fades away, losing its value in the light of Buddha's sacred teachings. All that used to give joy now seem futile to her in the light of Nirvana; all that pained her before, fails to disturb her anymore. All around her the plants appear timeless; all around her is peace, as there is within her. No human being! Yes, there is someone after all, whom she would not expect to be in the quietude of the mahavana. He approaches. He is young, dressed like a man-of-the-world. His smiling face is beautiful but the look in his eyes is lascivious. Sundari wants to leave her place and return to the convent because the manner of the young man does not please her at all. He bars her way.

'Stay, Sundari, and listen to me.'

'I withdrew into solitude to remain undisturbed and not to listen to you.'

'And I have come here because you had gone into solitude and no one will disturb us,' he laughs. 'You are more beauteous, more slender, than a talipot palm, your walk is that of a deer and makes my heart tremble; your mouth is more luscious than even the most beautiful of red lotuses ... and your eyes, Sundari! Such eyes ... that would make any devi jealous, their tint is soft and strong at the same time. Please, Sundari, give yourself to me!' He approaches her but Sundari recoils from him.

'Do not touch me under this tree, the sacred tree of the Buddha! You are ruining your karma!'

'Nothing can hold back my passion, Sundari! Give me your love, too!'

‘Get back! I have cast off all worldly lusts! Your love for me is like the suffocating sands of the desert, like poison!’

‘Then why were you reborn as a devi ... so beautiful! Why do you entice me so much that I suffer unendurable passion? Why do you cast aside what would give me unending happiness! Come, Sundari, we are all alone in this mahavana. No one can rescue you from my love, no one can rescue me from this sin; let me not die of passion, all because of a capricious whim of yours! Have mercy on me, too!’

He moves to take hold of her bare arm but she shrugs him away and with her eyes’ stern glance, she repels him once more. ‘I would rather die than offer you what I have abandoned for the sake of the Tataghata. I despise your depravity, to follow a vulnerable woman in the mahavana, to rob her of her honour. For me, my body is as paltry as a leaf that has fallen from a Bodhi tree.’

‘Your body is a masterpiece of creation, Sundari, and you place it at risk in the dangers of the mahavana. The tiger stalks by the side of the tree, the python constricts your beauteous body in the stranglehold of his coils and the scorpion and the cobra hoard their venom to kill you. Have you been created so exquisitely merely for that? Or, is it your destiny, Sundari, to offer your love to me? Come, Sundari!’

‘My body is but a prey for death. Not for your lust! All the ties that bound me with worldly existence have been severed. My body is a bubble of water, so frail, so insignificant. Now leave me alone!’

‘Your eyes are the very heavens, Sundari!’ He moves to take her. Nothing will stop him. She shrinks back, knowing she will be lost. Then, suddenly, she plucks out an eye and hands it over to him.

‘Look! A foul meat-ball! Take it! Do you desire the other one, too?’

The sinner shrinks back, stricken with horror. Is that the power of her faith? Her beauty is smeared with blood! He sinks down to his knees.

‘What have you done, Sundari! Forgive me!’

‘Then go! You see, my beauty is worthless, just a bubble.’

So saying, she leaves the forest without looking back at the rake and proceeds to the Buddha. ‘Lord, I plucked out my eye and gave it to the man who was seduced by it to sinfulness!’

‘Thou art holy, Sundari. Your spiritual eye now shines all the more beautiful, even more than your physical eye did before.’

The monk Sagata stays silent for a while. Then he concludes: 'The mighty word of the Buddha is like the sun for the chilled ones, as clothes for the naked, as the boat for the pilgrim who wishes to reach the far shore across the river, as the torch in the dark, as the stars in the nights for the sarthavahas in the desert. The Buddha be praised!'

The imperial family retires to their tents.

'Well, Diti, have Sagata's words consoled you?' Kanchanamala questions her first-servant who helps to undress her.

'It was beautiful, high Rani, but it made me feel wistful.'

'Wistful, you say, Diti?'

'Yes, high Rani, if I had but plucked out my eye as well!'

'Then I would not have had you as my servant, Diti. You were not yet a Buddhist who sees the world as maya. Tirha would have acknowledged your marriage to Tulya and you would have been a woman of honour. Is not the wilful mutilation of what is given to us more sinful?'

'And Sundari then, high Rani?'

'She was a nun from the Sangha. For her the body was like a water-bubble, her beauty, maya.'

'For me, the dishonoured one, life too no longer had value.'

'Not because of your faith but because of the scorn of Tirha. Tulya would have forgotten you had not his inner being changed. That is the influence of the sacred Maharajah. He has lifted up Tulya from his state of being a man of nature. His selfishness brought him no happiness. Tulya has felt the great compassion of the Emperor who, by the power of his wisdom, compels all who meet him to a greater understanding, to self-renunciation and to the conquest of selfishness.'

'Tulya was lucky that he met the holy Maharajah.'

'Do you not wish to make him happy? He had eyes only for you when we returned a moment ago.'

'No. Yasa ... I promised to be faithful to him, even after his death.'

'Yasa has died, maybe born again, and is not waiting for you.'

Diti reflects. 'I want to become a nun so I may not be reborn again.'

'Is that not selfishness, now that you are expecting a little child? Is not our very first duty the care of our children? The Sangha helps out of compassion, Tulya out of his love for the both of you.'

When Diti goes back to her own tent, Tulya is standing before her. Diti shrinks back. He whispers to her: 'Do not be startled, Diti, and do not be frightened. I only desire your happiness.'

'My happiness ... is not with you, Tulya,' she says, hesitatingly.

'Come along with me to the sal tree over there.'

Diti looks at him. She still hesitates even as she is struck by his perseverance. Her hate has dissipated ever since she turned towards the Buddha. Slowly, she walks at Tulya's side and they both sit down beneath the shady sal tree. Before them the open pasture and hushed nature glimmer in the soft light of the moon.

'Thank you for your trust. Your child, is my child, too. May I take care of it as well?'

'And I once again risk being a widow! You fail to understand the suffering I have gone through.'

'We will have sons who will support you.'

'The Jetavana will protect me.'

'You will not be a part of the Sangha for many years yet. Till then we shall take care of our child together!'

'... Become a member of the Sangha, too! I have seen you with the monks.'

'I, who am a hunter, who has killed animals, lived off their meat and have laid siege to you?'

'If you will walk the path of the Buddha, you will become unblemished and pure.'

'Will not I be unblemished and pure if I love you and our child, forsaking myself for your happiness? If I no longer kill animals and become an upasaka of the Buddha? Do we have to fear rebirth when our karma has been good? Inside the mahavana it is easy to lose one's life. That danger is now less threatening but life has taken on a new meaning for me. The monk endeavours towards his own transformation what is his personal choice. Is it less virtuous to safeguard the lives of the ones whom you love? That is what the holy Maharajah does. For you, life was a misfortune, and you saw the vihara as a refuge from insurmountable suffering. But I wish to support you, and your children will love you; no fellow-villager will scorn you anymore. Why do you then seek to see life as a bubble of water?'

'And when you die, and when my children die, what then?'

‘Ubbiri, Kishagotami, Nanda ... They then became members of the Sangha.’

For some time Tulya has been aware of a soft rustling. His sharp hunter’s ears have divined the cause of the softly ominous crackling, the placing of a paw on a dry twig, the rustling movement of leaves which every hunter recognises. Then his eyes catch a glimpse of a patch of yellow skin, mottled with dark patches; he hears harsh breath rasping. Silently he gets up, stalks towards the still hesitant animal, which must be tormented by a great hunger as to come so close to the camp. Diti, too, has become aware of it and of the danger posed by the animal. Giving a startled cry she dashes off towards the tents. The leopard, now vexed, quit the cover of the underbrush and pursues its prey. But before it can make the final leap, Tulya flies straight ahead and jumps on it. Man and animal grapple with each other on the ground. The hunter, quick as lightning, has it in his grip and a raw scream is heard in the silence of the night, followed by laboured grunting and hissing. With a swift twisting of its lithe back, its claws unsheathed, the leopard attempts to throw off its assailant, but Tulya’s hands do not let go. Coldly calculative, he waits for the right moment, and then the Kashi knife flashes as it is thrust in the blue moonlit night. One last spasm of death, a weakening rattle, and the victim lies spread out on the ground. Tulya clambers off, wipes his knife on the hairy hide, his eyes searching for Diti. She has run away in wild fear, looking backwards every now and then, anxious about Tulya. Suddenly, a person of noble mien is standing before her. An exquisite silken turban glittering with gemstones; a light yellow tunic with a dark-purple belt and his leather footwear let her know who is barring her way. A gleaming chakra glitters in his right hand.

‘You are frightened, Diti?’

‘Lord ... a ... panther. Tulya ...’ She points towards a moonlit spot and then falls to her knees.

‘Stand up, Diti. Tulya has killed an animal of prey. Come on, let us thank him for saving a human from an untimely death.’

Tulya, too, recognises the Maharajah, who is coming towards him with Diti. He kneels down.

‘Stand up, Tulya. Diti and I wish to thank you for having saved her from the teeth and the claws of this carnivore. Ask for a boon, Tulya.’

‘Lord, I wish Diti to be my wife, her child as my child. I require nothing else.’

‘Diti wishes to be a nun and may be distressed that you have killed a hungry leopard since the Buddha wishes that no life be taken.’

‘Is the leopard then permitted to take life, Sire? He who destroys life to slake his own lust has forfeited his right to life.’

Ashoka sympathises with the reasoning of this man of nature. He smiles. Was not his own defence similar for his fierce deeds?

‘But you have your manas, Tulya, to restrain every urge to kill, to deny the will of nature and negate that law.’

‘I cannot do that, holy Maharajah, when a bloodthirsty and deadly leopard wants Diti as its prey. Then the compassion of the Buddha would lead to folly! It would mean that every cobra, lion or leopard would be allowed to take the life of whomsoever it wants, while we, bestowed by the gods with manas, would have to look on, even as we are destroyed by their ravaging.’

‘I am impressed very much by your deed and if I am allowed to decide about Diti, I would entrust her to you but Diti has to decide for herself: my subjects have to choose their own path of life, in freedom.’

‘Lord, I do trust Tulya, our child, and myself. But I do not want to be a widow once more in Tirha or elsewhere.’

‘Even then, Diti, my viharas will always remain open for you.’

Hesitantly, Diti draws closer to Tulya. Tulya embraces her.

‘Holy Maharajah, we thank you for this boon.’ They then kneel down.

‘I hope my help will have been for your happiness. In a week’s time, I shall wait for you in Pataliputra, Tulya.’ The Maharajah then proceeds. Two joyous souls look on after him. When he has gone, Tulya says, ‘The Maharajah is a sage, Diti, because wherever he goes or extends his hands, he spreads blessings over India.’

For a while, Ashoka wanders about and then sits down on a bench in silence. The demeanour of these young people has touched him, the purity of their primal instincts which they follow as magical powers and their simple heartfelt convictions. He himself has struggled from his earliest youth to attain an insight of his own. Bindusara and Sayana impelled him to delve deep within his own manas to discover for himself his ambitions and his convictions. He had often to take decisions with swift astuteness. Yet, at

the same time, there were ideas which tossed about in his mind for days, for months or years before they matured. 'Harmony between the endeavours of the Sangha, and the natural inclination to protect his great empire! Harmony of the great compassion, with all that has been nobly gained.' So thinks Asandhi. But he lives day in day out, amidst the vast eddies of realities! That harmony is enfeebling his exertions ... To guide all peoples towards Nirvana is verily impossible. He feels that is 'yielding to weakness.' Nirvana is not his goal. His ambition is to change the inner views of all people, to transform them, so that war, the animosity between varnas, races and realms, will be abolished. Only progress towards benevolence and tolerance can save humanity from its degrading lust for murder of fellow-men. Dharma is the ever-present endeavour. The harmony that Asandhi has in mind is a constantly fluctuating one, always going too far, now here, then there. That disharmony he cannot accept without losing the power of his faith in humanity. One can strive towards one single point at the horizon but not towards all the points of the great wheel at the same time.

Ashoka probes the spirit of Tulya sharply. He knows what human soul lurks within this sturdy figure: 'Can the leopard be permitted to take life?' The implication of the Buddha's doctrine to Tulya is that every cobra, lion or leopard may kill whoever it wants. That is a hard reality. Does Tulya then bring about harmony when he kills the leopard and saves the human? Does it mean that harmony is the balance between the compassion of the Buddha and the lack of compassion of the will of nature? Is it possible to preach compassion and at the same time preach killing? According to the Jataka, the Buddha offered his body to the hungry mother-tigress. Did not the mother-tigress kill the Boddisatva to feed her offspring? And Tulya, kill the leopard to save Diti? Harmony is brought by the human spirit, who, filled with compassion, understands the crudeness and fights it. Nature is bound by its own laws, which man does not know nor has mastered. Let the heavenly bodies come to a standstill in their celestial vault, and all life and time is broken off. Let each object lose its mass, form and essence, and the world is but a void; remove the 'whys and wherefores' and the world is left bereft of reason ... chaos! The compassion-only of the Buddha creates a world of chaos while the reality-only of the world makes Buddha's compassion void of reason. Is that the harmony between the spirit and the world? The world of human beings!

The entrance cloth over the front of the tent of Tishya Rakshita is thrust aside and the Rani steps out. Her maid has wrapped a bright red shawl around her. Excitedly, she strides towards Ashoka.

‘Lord ... the roaring of wild animals woke me up!’

‘You can go back again to your undisturbed sleep, my Tishya. Tulya has killed a panther that was searching for some food.’

‘Oh! What a pity that I did not see this.’ Ashoka notices the sparkle in her eyes.

‘Does this clear night in one of Buddha’s most loved groves not induce you towards peace towards man and ... animal?’

‘An animal of prey and peace! An animal of prey is a contest, lord. The human is no fawn that lets itself be killed even as it cries. And I like a Tulya so much better than a sannyasin who voluntarily sacrifices himself to the hungry tiger. My father rejoiced at the call of the battle and that he could kill the enemy.’

‘Did Tishya Rakshita also rejoice when the battle killed him?’

‘I wanted to avenge him,’ she allows herself to be carried away.

‘On whom?’

‘On the rabble that killed him!’

‘And who will take it upon himself to avenge you? And who will avenge the one who vanquishes you? Where does this chain of your vengeance end? And in the very end, who will rejoice? You too will have been vanquished! Or, are you seeking that pinnacle of revenge, the ultimate power to avenge where no new retribution will smite you? At the cost of another’s happiness? Do you not understand, my Tishya, that you then wish for the world an excess of suffering and only an atom of happiness ... and that only for yourself? There would be more vengefulness within you than in a blood-thirsty tiger, which kills only for his survival. Buddha’s compassion is meant for each and every human and animal: to have the utmost of happiness and the least of suffering as is possible. Is that not a superior outlook for the world, for humans themselves? Even though you may be the only one who suffers?’

‘Why should I to be the only one? That would indeed be a great injustice!’

‘Do you think it is more justified that all suffer because of your vengefulness?’

Tishya flushed. Perhaps, because of the awakening of a deeper insight? The Rani realises that she is a world away from the one whom she wishes to win over, the way Asandhimitra won him over. Compassion is for the Buddhist monk and the Emperor but not for the Kshatriya for whom battle, revenge, and victory means life itself. A warrior places his foot on the carcass of the tiger, the enemy! Why should he be touched by the pain of the one who is left behind! But that is not the way of her Lord, the mighty, holy Maharajah of India! This is why she does not reveal herself to him. She would be wiser!

‘No, Sire, the sacred Maharajah softens the sufferings of millions. That is why he is sacred!’

Ashoka keeps quiet and accompanies her back to her tent.

‘Sleep well, Tishya Rakshita. May the gods soothe all the panthers so that the Rani may fall asleep.’

She smiles up at him but deep within rages resentment against this man who disapproves of all that, from her wasted youth, is still alive inside her. She cannot bear that sweetness. She only endures it because she wants the power of the Agramahisi. She detests the compassion of the Buddha that strikes down on all that offers her joy, the power to do all that gives her satisfaction and that brings joy because of success. She envies Kanchanamala who will one day be the Agramahisi when the old Maharajah passes away. But will the Buddha’s mighty word one day rule the world? The peoples of the mahavana who feel like her? But she will feign compassion or else the Maharajah will turn away from her.

The following day, she is seated along with Kanchanamala on the royal elephant, and Kunala rides along with his father. Ashoka gauges how life in the mahavana has influenced the Yuvaraja and sharpened his judgement. He sends his messengers to Pataliputra to prepare the government and the people for a joyous reception of the Yuvaraja and the young Yuvarani.

‘And do you feel happy as the Rani of the young Yuvaraja?’

‘Would I otherwise have left the hermitage?’

‘One does not leave the mahavana but by compulsion.’

‘Then it is the compulsion of my love, mother Tishya.’

Tishya looks at her and for one brief moment, a fierce jealousy blazes in her eyes, which startles Kancha.

‘The Rani of the Maharajah is merely an extension of little value, Kanchanamala, a part of his retinue. Like a gemstone in his turban.’

An unpleasant jolt shakes Kancha. Why does Mother Tisya want to shake her confidence in Kunala?

‘I will be his Agramahisi and will assist him in his difficult task, if my feeble power is capable of doing so.’

‘And there will be no Asandhimitra attached to the new Maharajah!’

Kancha feels the bitterness in these words and must think how young Tishya Rakshita is yet, and how old the Maharajah. Is she, Kancha, a mere ornament, an adornment in the anthapura? No, she will be the Agramahisi because Kunala needs her when he wavers. She wants to love him, support him, and like the holy Maharajah’s Agramahisi, bear his burdens along with him. Is it the jealousy of mother Tishya? Suddenly, she has to think of Katcha who in his jealousy and hate caused the elephant-attack. Would Kunala one day establish another woman over her? The true eyes of Kunala! Tishya sees how a smile breaks through the serious features of Kancha’s face, like the sun through an opening in dark clouds. And that arouses her envy even more.

‘I am Ashoka’s fifth wife,’ she says sharply.

‘He is charmed by your beauty,’ laughs the Yuvarani.

That flatters Tishya’s vanity. ‘And your manas,’ Kancha adds.

Now Tishya laughs and it surprises the Yuvarani that Tishya’s face suddenly softens. Father has told Katcha that he is a double-personality, a high Brahmin and at the same time a demon. That demonic may be a part of all people and not everyone has the discipline to control it. Or, is it that one is either a human or a demon, as the Buddhists believe? Do not they ask of the bhikshu, ‘Are you a human?’ That is ‘Are you not a demon?’ Why has the Maharajah taken that beautiful woman into the anthapura? Tishya does not allow her to quietly follow her thoughts.

‘Is your father a hermit, a Brahmin?’

‘Yes, a Brahmin by birth. The holy Maharajah knew him from the days when they were both brahmacharin with Sayana in the amra-forest on this side of the Ganga. Sayana admired the Prince because of his strength of mind and will for the good. He was right, the holy Maharajah became a blessing for India. He is full of compassion but is unyielding in his fight against evil and injustice.’

‘They say that Buddhism has enfeebled him. In his youth he struck down at whatever stood in his way. My father, a proud Kshatriya, and my brother, he wiped them away from their territory.’

‘His daughter is a Rani in his anthapura,’ smiles Kancha. ‘Which mouse will offer resistance to a lion, mother Tishya! My father says that the holy Maharajah never demands what he, according to his sacred power, is not entitled to. When he is surrounded by darkness, he is always looking for the light. He is a Brahmin because he is ruled by truth and justice.’

Tishya looks at her. She has always yielded to Asandhimitra’s wisdom. Will she have to as well for this young Brahmin woman? Her face is unmoved but in her soul rages a scorching fire. She will smother the flames. Perhaps, it will take a long time yet before Kanchanamala becomes Agramahisi.

‘The grace of the Maharajah illumines all of India. His power is as wide as the sky,’ she says earnestly. But Kanchanamala sees through her.

‘Who is living so close to the Maharajah must know him well!’ she says tightly and she notices that Tishya observes her with suspicion.

On the banks of the Ganga, the imperial retinue is immediately taken across the river to the southern banks, where elephants and troops in stately attire await. The Maharajah and the Maharani ride on the royal elephant in the front, followed by Kunala and Kanchanamala. The streets, roofs and balconies are packed with crowds of people who shower flowers along the path of the royal travellers. Like a mighty flood, cheers roll through the city: ‘Hail to the holy Maharajah!’. Joy radiates from people’s faces. Fathers and mothers hold up their children to show them the Maharajah and the Maharani, the Yuvaraja and the young Yuvarani. Ashoka’s countenance is earnest as ever but within him there is joy and happiness. His thoughts go back to the days when he longed to bring prosperity and happiness to his subjects and when he felt himself to be a seeking one, a mighty yet powerless one, in his battle for the imperial throne, doubting its success because of the hatred around him. In those days his power was built upon his fierce horsemen, on his ‘hell’. Those days have long since gone by. Good fortune and prosperity and a just rule have changed his peoples and at last he feels secure in their fold. He knows his beloved son will be, too.

Every once in a while Tishya Rakshita stealthily glances at the old Maharajah. In her jealousy, she believes the cheering hails to be directed

only to the Emperor, the Yuvaraja and the young Yuvarani, and not to her. In the last few days she has already shown too much of herself, and she now wants to be more careful. Amiably she asks: 'Is my Lord pleased that his people welcome his son and the beautiful young Yuvarani so warmly?'

'Once upon a time, it was my deepest wish, Tishya Rakshita. In the days the people hated me, they were praising their own misfortune. Now they honour me, they praise their own good fortune. That is what pleases me. It honours my son as well. It gives me trust in my peoples and him. A Maurya has always to be a blessing for India.'

'And are the peoples a blessing for the Mauryas,' she laughs.

'Surya is blessing India with rich blossom and harvest; India praises the Sun-goddess, but she will continue to bless us even when we do not praise her. That is what I wish from the Mauryas. The joyful respect of my peoples proves to me I did well.'

'My father demanded respect and subjugation from his subjects.'

'Your father refused to give that to the one who was placed above him. That has cost him his life, like it cost his subjects their lives when they refused him. Guilt avenges itself!'

Tishya reflects on those words. She knows too well that her old spouse controls every conversation by his trueness and manas. But not her thoughts!

'Except when man does not realise his guilt,' she says.

'His own conscience!'

'And he who does not have a conscience or suppresses it?'

'My judges will awaken his conscience,' the Maharajah answers sternly and with great emphasis.

Tishya is startled. Does he read her thoughts? Does he suspect that it annoys her to be just an adornment, taken out of pity into the anthapura of her old spouse? Insignificant as Karuvaki, Padmavati? She, the daughter of a proud Kshatrya! Will she one day have to bow down to the Agramahisi of Kunala's court? She can hardly control her rage! But that, the Maharajah will never come to know!

After everyone has refreshed and recovered from the journey, the royal family gathers in the reception hall to be introduced to the young Rani who, as a radiant bride at Kunala's hand, is led to Asandhi and the other Ranis, Princes, and Princesses.

‘Come, Karuvaki, welcome the jungle-Princess with a little more enthusiasm,’ says Padmavati. Karuvaki, stretched out on a long seat, gets up slowly. Being herself a daughter of Anga’s mahavana, she did not flourish in Pataliputra and the anthapura. Therefore, Ashoka had his palace in Kausambi made ready for her where she could live with her daughter, Charumati and her little son, Tivara, close to the jungle of the Doab and there she could enjoy the purity of the country life in the unspoiled woods. And as earlier in Anga, she once again became the cheerful, healthy forest-Princess, happy with every visit of the Maharajah. Charumati married young to Devapala, a Kshatriya from Nepal. Together they have brought her there and at the order of Ashoka there rose the city of Devapattana, with monasteries and stupas. It had been an unforgettable journey. For now she sojourns again at the capital because her palace at Kausambi will be rebuilt in stone. There is one she cannot bear, the youngest Rani.

‘Why should I be happy when they enclose a blossoming flower of the mahavana in the anthapura where she cannot reach out to the sun? She belongs to the jungle, there she can develop beauty and strength. Here ... she withers away too soon.’

‘And what about Tishya who is even more beautiful than the young Yuvarani?’

‘She is crafty and will hide her less noble intentions.’

‘Your thoughts about your Kshatriya-sister are unfriendly and unreasonable.’

‘One who comes out of the mahavana is open and natural!’

‘Asandhi is pure and beautiful, open and natural as the Sarayu, whose rippling always sang around her. She loves Tishya.’

‘In the jungle of the Doab are lions and jackals. There are bulbuls in the top of the trees whose songs resound like bells through a forest-temple, and there are snakes in the darkness of the forest ground.’

‘Karuvaki. Karuvaki!’

‘Forgive me, Padmavati, that I do not celebrate the festive day of your son in a better mood. Why had she to travel to Vaishali! Why not you, Kunala’s mother? Nostalgia for the paddy fields and mango groves at the Hiranyavati she does not know! She wants to play an important role in the anthapura. Seated besides the Maharajah on the royal elephant she wants to

receive the honours to which she is not due. She is not in the least interested in this great beautiful country, only in honour and might...'

'Are you jealous, Karuvaki?'

Karuvaki shrugs. 'I begrudge her, not you!'

That very moment, Tishya Rakshita nears both ladies.

'Well, Padmavati, are you pleased that we return your son to you together with a daughter-in-law?'

'Certainly, my Tishya, I thank you for your cooperation.'

'Tishya has represented the Agramahisi, I guess,' says Karuvaki coolly.

'Then get your solace from that. You seem to need it,' comes the sharp remark from Tishya.

'And did you give that to Kancha too who had to leave the lovely mahavana to become Rani between the five hundred towers?'

Tishya reddens and turns to Kunala's mother:

'The Yuvaraja is happy, Padmavati. The jungle air has made him strong and more beautiful.' Then she withdraws.

'If I were the Yuvaraja, such praise would not please me,' Karuvaki whispers in the ear of her friend.

'Your gloominess makes you unfair, my Karuvaki.'

'Maybe ...'

Meanwhile, Asandhimitra speaks to the young Yuvarani. 'And did you find it hard to say farewell to the Bhagavati, my child?'

'I was very fond of the life in Tirha, Mother Asandhimitra, but I was only made aware of its beauty by Kunala. His thoughts go beyond the beautiful flowers, trees and streams of the mahavana. The perpetual gurgling of the Bhagavati, which will never abandon me, is a reminder to be a *bhagavati*² in India. That is what a woman wants, if she can.' She smiles.

'She can, my dear Kancha, if she has a husband who like the holy Maharajah is inspired with lofty ambition. I, too, have always wished to be a support to my Lord in joy and in sorrow. Even the greatest of human beings needs that.'

Tishya has heard it. A burning jealousy squeezes her heart. 'Which of his women will be his support, noble Agramahisi, like you are for the Maharajah?'

‘Tishia Rakshita always worries before it is time, my Kancha. Do not worry! It will depend on Kunala and you yourself and whether your marriage fulfils your expectations.’

Tishya feels that her passionate nature has carried her away again and Asandhi saves her, as usual. Kancha is again unpleasantly struck by Tishya’s words. What is it that this woman wants? Her strange eyes, which at one moment flash like Surya’s rays, then shimmer like soft moonlight? Kancha’s pride forces her to defence.

‘Mother Tishya called me an extension, an adornment in the retinue of the Yuvaraja, a gemstone in his turban. I would be Agramahisi—as Kunala told me—if there would not be added an Asandhimitra to me. Why should I be made aware of that! I am not ... an addition. The Yuvaraja has asked my father to make us happy. He knows, like I do, what a Brahmin means with that. Certainly mother Tishya will not determine it. That will be decided by the Yuvaraja and myself.’

Asandhi looks at Tishya reproachfully and sees the fear in her eyes. That rouses her pity.

‘Why should you upset a young bride, Tishya, while you yourself have been showered with such good fortune?’

‘All brides of the mahavana who go to the big city cause me to fear and worry, dear Agramahisi. When happiness radiates from her countenance and her eyes, I want to cry out that the downfall will be even greater. That is how I experienced it myself. I wish good fortune awaits Kanchanamala as I myself got it.’

‘So be it. You look at life as too much of a burden. Our sorrow depends on our karma in our earlier births, they say. But to us is given the strength to bear it. Neither you nor I know what life will offer to Kanchanamala. I wish fervently that she may be happy like me. Kunala will be the next Maharajah and Kancha his Agramahisi,’ she adds consolingly.

‘Thank you, mother Asandhimitra.’ Kancha bows down and kisses the hem of her robe. Then she goes to the others. Tears fill Tishya’s eyes, out of hatred and jealousy. Or, out of remorse, thinks Asandhimitra ...

‘Come, my child, reflect always before you use words. People so easily misunderstand them. Rejoice in other people’s happiness instead of worrying them with possible misfortune. The first the people will praise, the latter disapprove. Sharing of joy is much rarer than pity. Kanchanamala

seems to me to be a sensible woman, well-suited for the difficult task that awaits her. We should help her and in friendliness show her the way’...

Karuvaki had kept a sharp eye on Kancha and she watched the small commotion around the Agramahisi.

‘Has the youngest Rani saddened Asandhi’s friends?’

Kancha looks up at her, shaken.

‘No, mother Karuvaki. On the contrary; the Rani hurt me, but we from the jungle do not succumb to that.’

Karuvaki nods. ‘No, fortunately not! We know whip-snakes and cobras, jackals and leopards, you want to say. You and I originate from the free jungle, my Kancha!’

‘Phooey, Karuvaki!’

‘Yes, Padmavati, if you do not warn the wife of your son of the obstacles in the anthapura, I have to do it. Come, tell us about that beautiful jungle where you were born, Kancha. You know the sun, the Hymavant, the maha-mahavana! I know the hunt but you are a Brahmin lady and have dreamt at the foot of a mighty banyan or listened to the whispering palms. It is as if the scent of the woods on the other side of the river entered with you over the moat into the palisades of Pataliputra. When I look at you it is as if a spark of my youth glows suddenly inside my veins, Kancha.’

Kancha smiles happily and starts talking; she feels a kinship to this Rani through the sun, the forest, the skies ... the Atman.



THE UNSEEN FRIEND

In the month of *Agrahayana*¹ a ship from Lanka moors at Tamralipti on the Bhagavati, the western estuary of the Ganga. On board is a delegation of the young king. The old Mutasiva, his uncle, has died and Mogalu Tissya succeeded him. Mutasiva was not receptive to new ideas, but the air was filled with what happened yonder in India. Every ship brought news about the mighty empire of the Maharajah, who understood so well the new age in which Vaishyas and Shudras gained power and wealth and relations between people changed so much that there grew a royal line which did not belong to the two highest varnas. Consequently, a young Prince had seized power. He brought prosperity to the vast empire, aligned with the sect of the Buddha which he allowed to flourish with all his energy and inexhaustible wealth because he wished to make the oppressed multitude aware of their human value and wished to transform people from opposing each other as enemies into people with a kind and sympathetic attitude. Thousands, millions of all ranks, aligned themselves with the great monarch who is a father to all his subjects, even extending his protective power over the animals of his empire. A hitherto unknown enthusiasm also shook the heart of the young man who took over the throne of Lanka. With the many rites of his country, he is crowned. But the radiant example of the mighty Emperor Ashoka is, before his eyes, like a luminous sun. He desires to pay

tribute to him as a friend, because of his sublime notions of kingship. He wants to place at his feet the most beautiful products of Lanka. Arishta, his sister's son, leads the delegation; a Brahmin, a high Counsellor, and a minister of the Treasury, together with a great retinue of distinguished persons from Lanka, carry the gifts.

The *Nagaraka*² of Tamralipti sends swift messengers to the Maharajah, and soon, ox-carts carry the delegation through the endless fields of paddy and sugar cane to Medinipura. They then proceed to the north, crossing the Dharmodaya³-river, and through the Gummagatta⁴-mountains to Gaya. There the imperial elephants are waiting, ready for the guests, and in a splendid procession the journey continues on the great road leading to Pataliputra, where the Maharajah gives the company a festive welcome. He receives the delegation in the great Throne hall. The court presents itself in rich courtly attire. The ministers and the parishad take their place in the hall, gleaming of gold and silver. The delegation enters and is escorted to the throne. Soft music of veenas, flutes, ravanasthas and lightly touched drums, resounds through the slender pillars, decorated with the finest stylistic work of art of precious metals. Arishta takes the hem of Ashoka's robe, touches it against his forehead, and rises at the hand of the Maharajah.

‘Mighty Emperor of a World empire, Sacred and gracious Maharajah of India, the newly-crowned King of Lanka greets you. Deeply touched, he has followed the growing of your power and the divine ambitions of Your Gracious and Sacred Majesty, and admires the shining example of a fatherly ruler. The fragrance of your deeds has wafted through the air to countries far away and we listen with delight when the subjects of this great country proclaim your fame in our country, too. If we may believe them then there is no cave in the forests of the Himalayas, where joy is not roused in the hearts because of your decisions and works, no resting place on the banks of the holy Narmada, in the Vindhya, where they do not invigorate pilgrims hoping for salvation, no caravanserai in the deserts of the west, where they do not lift the spirits up in the silent nights, no hamlet in the lush paddy and sugar cane fields on the banks of the holy Ganga, where storytellers do not enthral with legends about your life, no house or hermitage in the plains in your limitless kingdom, where they do not praise the gods that placed you on the ivory throne of Pataliputra. Where cruelty mocked at man and animal your compassion stretches out its hand, grown in strength, to give the kiss of life to those struck down by fate. Where

unfairness, crassness and misuse of power brought destruction, sorrow, and gnashing of teeth, there your pure reason intervenes with heart-warming and strengthening justice. May your power watch over the country for a long time yet and your descendants lead your peoples forever to prosperity and a blessed life. Devanampiya Tissa hails Your Sacred Majesty as a friend because of your beautiful deeds. He hopes you will accept a few artefacts from Lanka that may bring him often into your sacred memories.'

Arishta then hands over to the Maharajah the most precious gift first: a box of pearly white ivory, carved by the greatest artist among the ivory carvers of his country. In it is cradled a string of pearls of such perfect splendour and of such unheard of size that the Emperor rises to look at them, filled with admiration.

'Messengers from heaven, Arishta!'

'The pure raindrops from the first clouds of the spring, noble Maharajah, caught by the most pure oysters in their shells and frozen to pristine, eternal beauty, so one believes in Lanka.'

'I will wear them whenever my duty calls me for the well-being of my peoples. Do tell my noble friend, the King of Lanka, that.' A female servant places them around the neck of the holy Maharajah and Arishta bows deeply at so much honour. Then he spreads the other gifts at the feet of the Emperor. Pure scarves of the finest of Singhalese weaving art, embroidered with the choicest amethysts and topazes, garnets and sapphires, corundum and hyacinths; carvings of Lanka-ivory, magnificently cut gemstones in settings of white metal. An excited whisper rustles gently through the throne-hall. To each Rani, Arishta offers a skilfully made necklace in which the purest pearls of the island are inlaid.

'Envoys of my noble friend, Devanampiya Tissa, when you go back to your country, thank him on my behalf for these precious works of art. Furthermore, tell him that if my subjects praise me it is because I have placed my empire under the protection of the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, and I have taken my refuge in the Buddha, his pure Dharma and in the holy Sangha of the Buddha. That India now breathes freer, lives more joyfully and has brought peace to its turbulent heart is a miracle, brought about by the compassion of the son of the Shakyas, the Tathagata, the Accomplished Buddha. That is the message that I would like to bring to Lanka, too.'

For five months the delegation sojourns in the capital of India. During this period Ashoka orders the most skilled ornamental-metal workers of

Pataliputra to make reciprocal gifts for the King of Lanka, his unseen friend. Every type of emblem in gold, fit for the eminence of the King, then chamaras of the most exquisite yak-tails from Tibet, a royal parasol of thick Chinese silk, adorned with gemstones from his empire, a golden forehead-belt and a silk scarf embroidered with diamonds, a sword of Kashi-steel with a golden hilt, a silver vessel for the anointment, on which Buddhist legends are embossed, a howda, built and upholstered with great splendour for the royal elephant, and gold vessels with water from the Ganga and the Anavatapa-lake⁵, all objects used at the coronation of a king.

With the Lankan delegation, Ashoka sends his own envoys, among whom are some eminent monks of the Ashokarama. The Lankan king is so much delighted with the tokens of Ashoka's friendship that he has himself crowned for a second time using the rites and tokens of dignity of India.

Blessed by Devi, the royal lady of Vidisha, Mahindra, the high missionary, leaves for Lanka imbued with the fervour, willpower and the humanity of his great father. He, the Emperor's son—the one most moved by the benevolent spirit of the Tathagata, the excellent scholar of the canon, decreed upon at the 'Council of Thousand' of the Buddhist Sangha—will bring there the teachings and purposes of the Buddha, which later will make a triumphant march to the waiting countries of the Far East.

Many women in Lanka—amongst them Anula, the wife of the younger brother of the King Mahanaga—express the wish that they, too, would like to dedicate themselves to a spiritual life. King Tissya requests Mahindra to accept her into the Sangha but Mahindra explains that he is not permitted to do so. He advises the King to ask of his father in Pataliputra that Sanghamitra, his sister, famous for her knowledge of Buddhist teachings, be sent for. At the same time a cutting from the Bodhi-tree of Bodh Gaya will also be sent. Once again Arishta is assigned to the mission. In the first half of Asveena⁶, he begins the journey to Pataliputra again and Ashoka fulfils the request of his son and his friend. With utmost care and many ceremonies, a cutting of the Bodhi-tree is planted in a golden pot. Seven days later, in Karttika⁷, the sapling grows and the first sprouts appear. Ashoka, along with Sanghamitra, eleven bhikkhunis and a small retinue, embark on a beautifully decorated ship. After a successful trip of seven days on the calm waters of the Ganga along the forested foothills of the Vindhyas, the ship arrives at Tamralipti where a sea-going vessel is waiting to bring Sanghamitra and the sapling of the Bodhi tree to Lanka. The

Maharajah himself carries the sapling on board and commends it to the care of Arishta, uttering his blessings for the success of the journey and for the development of the Buddha's doctrine in Lanka.

Sanghi bids the Maharajah farewell: 'My Father, I will for ever keep you in thought as the tireless worker for the happiness of the other, as the venerator of the Tathagata. I wish to worship the Buddha, love the Buddha and admire the Buddha when I am in Lanka.'

It is hard for the Maharajah for he knows it is a farewell for life. She is herself full of fervour for her holy task in Lanka.

'I bless you and Mahindra, my child. You both have chosen what your soul longed for and what the Buddha wanted. Attain heaven on your sacred path towards Nirvana.'

For a long time he stares at the departing ship. Once more Sanghi holds up the young Bodhi tree⁸ and the Maharajah blesses the eagerly sprouting sapling from afar. Two of his children have left the kingdom, captivated by the doctrine of the world-conquering and world-renouncing Shakhya Prince. And it is as if some part of him is dying with the loss of both those disciples. But the flight of the doctrine will spread wider, in the direction of his striving, the way he had desired. Devi: Had she not, with her great love, laid in these two disciples the foundation of the Buddha? He, Ashoka, has surged forward on his way of the Maharajah. Are these two in pursuit of that eternal power that will tear away mankind from trishna, nature's Will? Will everything come as it comes or as it is willed? Buddha's doctrine will spread over Lanka. And there, too, will the Wheel of Faith roll forward. Why then should it not roll towards the North the West and the East and capture any new Alexander in its rush!

The ship disappeared in the vastness of the ocean carrying the Bodhi-branch to Lanka and Sanghi to the country where Mahindra works. All in Tamralipti kneel down along the road when Ashoka returns to Pataliputra, where he will again take over Kunala's task.

Kunala gets up early in the morning and diligently fulfils the duties of the uparaja. After exchanging friendly words with the monks who greet him, he goes to the audience hall. The armoured female palace-guards are all standing in place. Without saying a word the Prince strides along the rows, followed by Tulya who always keeps the distance of a few steps behind him, searching like a Himalayan hunter, for any threat of danger for the

Prince. The holy Maharajah has told him to take special care and the grateful hunter feels himself responsible for the life of the uparaja.

In the audience hall, surrounded by some female guards, are several subjects who have come to have their cases heard. Like his father, Kunala is capable of swiftly dealing with these cases. Having been briefed before by the different departments, he can swiftly respond to everything placed before him and he gives his orders, which are instantly put into writing by the lipikaras. At last, there is only one woman left, a Shudra, poorly dressed but one can see that her clothes, a dhoti⁹ and a brown shawl, are washed well and dyed freshly for the occasion. Her frizzy black hair is bound together by a ribbon, and her dark eyes look meekly up at the beautifully dressed uparaja on his great seat.

‘Come closer, Ahalya, you come from the far away Ramagar at the Dharmodaya.’

The Shudra woman kneels down and bows her head. ‘Ten days of travel, Sir.’

‘Get up, Ahalya. Have you walked?’

‘Yes, Sir. There is no room for a Shudra in the ox-carts.’

‘Is such a journey not dangerous for a woman?’

‘I have not thought of that, Sir. The people shun a Shudra and the animals are friendly or I keep them away with the amulets a magician gave me.’

‘You have come for your son.’

‘Yes Sir, my son works for a young Vaishya whose father once was deprived of his land by a neighbour who had become friends with the pradesika and that man sent some men of the law. In the fight that ensued my husband was killed but my son who is tall and strong, fiercely defended himself and killed two of the men. When he was wounded, they bound him and led him away to prison. I went to the pradesika and asked him to give back my son to me as he is the only one who can protect me, Sir.’

‘He should not have opposed the men of law, Ahalya, but should have come to the Maharajah.’

‘Sir, a Shudra has to serve and obey his master.’

‘But unlawful acts he need not and is not allowed to perform.’

‘Sir, the land was stolen and he believed in the rights of the farmer.’

‘And did the pradesika free your son?’

‘No Sir. They have told me that my son will be sentenced to death, strangled for his crime. In Ramagar they say that the Maharajah protects Shudras, too. I left the same day, Sir.’

‘Did you speak to the pradesika himself?’

‘No Sir. A Shudra will not be admitted. And the holy Maharajah never refuses to listen to a Shudra.’

‘We will investigate the case, Ahalya. Today soldiers will be sent to Ramagar. If everything has happened as you say you will get back your son. We will have an ox-cart sent along for you. In the afternoon, when the sun is at its highest, wait at the Gaya gate. Ask the guards for food.’

Some soldiers depart for Ramagar towards the afternoon. They will free Ahalya’s son and take the pradesika back to Pataliputra to give account of himself to the uparaja. Furthermore, the Dharmamahamatra Kesina is ordered to investigate the situation in the district of Ramagar to improve the administration and appoint a trustworthy rajuka to administer justice. The Maharajah desires a just and speedy handling of affairs.

Only then does Kunala proceed to the palace to the Rani and their child.

‘Will he be Maharajah too one day, Kancha, our son?’

‘I will ask the magician of Ahalya,’ she laughs.

He takes leave of them and after having sent Tulya to his wife and child who are waiting for him in their house, which is close to that of Satyavat and Rohini, he turns towards the stone-wing of the palace where he keeps his veena. He tunes the instrument, dreamily plucks some melodies that will carry his thoughts to regions far away, from where all these subjects come before the Maharajah, full of trust, to seek justice from the Father of his peoples. Again, his fingers pluck the strings and with the Ganga murmuring in the distance, he sings in a fine resonant voice:

‘In Jyeshtha¹⁰ the cricket hops lazily and the creek slumbers,
Wearily the snake draws his coils, the predator gasps for air. The
monkeys sit huddled together on a branch, the peacock is in a
dream-state.

The wild boar digs deep down into his bath of mud, and mankind
sighs.

But in Vasanth the kokila shouts with joy, the frog croaks, The tiny-
cricket leaps high onto the top of the bushes, the mocking bird
laughs,

The antelope springs in wide bounds, all life awakens...
In the blushing blossoms of mango trees and kimsuka, the lovable girl awaits.'

Kunala smiles; the mahavana with Kancha still fills his whole being. Why is all beauty, again and again, burdened by suffering? Does one think of the cricket, of the eager bird that snatches it, of the bird frozen by the snake's gaze; of the boars and deer hunted by hunters eager for their meat? Of the sweet fawn on which the panther jumps? What sense does all this suffering make? Who will remove the suffering of the world! Kunala hears a soft, almost furtive step in the silent building. Mother Tishya Rakshita! She approaches him, her slender form shimmering in the finest woven muslin, a string of jasmine her only adornment. Her lithe step is like the gait of a young dancer. Her full, perfect arms make beguiling movements while her beautifully formed fingers grasp her fine cloth. Her hips, which curve from her slender waist into graceful lines within her gossamer dress, seemed carved from, the most precious ivory. She laughs at him as though the loveliest of thoughts have woven themselves within her heart. Such laughter adds to the sensual charm of her unrivalled beauty, which she knows to be a temptation and with which she, with seeming naïveté, ensnares him. Kunala looks up with admiration at the youngest Rani.

'How serious you look, my Kunala, as if the burden of ruling already depresses you,' she says, and with her most bewitching smile she adds: 'Cannot the veena bring out a light-hearted melody, a touch of joy from its soul?'

'Oh, certainly, mother Tishya. A good veena possesses all the beauty of music in all its delightful shades and tones of every melody. But not everyone is able or knows the art of drawing them out from the instrument, so many directions of beauty it can encompass.'

'You play much; does not your soul encompass also love and hate, sorrow and gaiety, the lightness of the human heart beside the serious reverence and do you not wish to give voice to them! Why that ever-present solemnity here at the court!' Her lips curl in a golden laugh that softens the sharpness of her words.

'My father works from dawn till dusk for the millions of his subjects; for him that is a serious matter and he never takes his work and decisions

lightly. So, it is my endeavour to mature towards this lofty task when once he will lose his strength,' the Uparaja says brightly.

'But you are not as old as he is, your seriousness may come too early to make you well aware of the lighter side of human nature. Who does know true seriousness, who does not yet know joy ... or deep reverence, who has not yet tasted the lightness first ... who with burning love does not know hatred and can let go his tensions now and then!'

Kunala looks at her with his reflective eyes, notices how a deeper glow comes over her beautiful features. Is there wisdom in her words or is it the demon that is active and thrashing inside her, as Kancha thinks!

'But to hatred and joy and lightness of spirit one is inclined too easily, mother Tishya. The Buddha says: 'keep your thoughts pure, master your senses'. He who has looked at life in the mahavana in its inner-most drive, sees there is only a drive for lust and fight to give expression to life. But the Buddha has shown a loftier endeavour for the human being: compassion. That will end the suffering of all life. And that will be the joy in bitter gravity.'

'Tut, tut, tut, my Kunala. If you wish to see suffering in the world you will see suffering everywhere; do you want to see joy and cheer or lust you can find that everywhere, too. Look, Kunala, the water of the lake over there is black if someone stares into its dark floor with a heavy heart, but clear and sparkling if one darts about on its waves, so that its splashing drops gleam in Surya's rays. Is it not more appealing to watch it sparkling with light than staring at the darkness of its untraceable depths?' Many of the thoughts that Tishya Rakshita expresses were often spoken to her by Asandhimitra when the beautiful young Rani enveloped herself once more in her woeful musings. But the truth within touched the young Prince as though it came from the heart.

'Hatred's sharp sting is blunted, mother Tishya, when love keeps prevailing over it and grief is less painful when inner happiness conquers it and seriousness loses its rigidity if lightness brightens it like Surya's golden rays do to the dark thunder-clouds. It is the harmony that balances everything again, gives colour to life's darkness, and softens the all-too bright lightness. Listen, mother Tishya.' He takes up his veena.

*'Now life creeps slowly along; then its powers grow,
Now springs the bud, then ripens the fruit.'*

*But always nature unfolds its power,
According to unwritten law, in an eternal flight ...
It's all maya, which looks clear and real to us,
And truth, which seemed illusory:
An ever evolving life that always disappears again,
And only gives us bliss by our diligent endeavour!'*

Tishya listens in delight to his beautiful voice. The only thing she does not like is the serious atmosphere. She absorbs the tones from his mouth and the look of his eyes into her soul but that ever pining for the salvation of the world, for the suffering of mankind! Purity and salvation! Is life as life not good enough? And beauty and love! Are they not part of his limited way of thinking? Kanchanamala! Temper flares up in her. Is she his Asandhi? What does life mean to a man like Kunala when it does not crave for expression, the quenching of the irrepressible flames of the soul! Agramahisi! Uttering words of wisdom, commenting about the prosperity, well-being and salvation of those who sinned, and the peoples! Do not the peoples have to work for their lord, the Raja, the Maharajah and the glory of his court, for the greatness of their capital, for the lustre of the palace-residents? Is it not outrageous to equate the Shudra and even the Chandala, with the Kshatriya in a Sangha? What kind of a world is a Sangha, a desert of all-equal grains of sand where each one has the same value and beauty as the other? What is mankind when all are of equal varna, of equal prestige? What desolation! She knows she is beautiful, irresistible to a man, if she wishes to be. Did not the mightiest one, the Maharajah, take her into the harem? She knows the irresistible attraction of her laugh, of her movements, of her look. And here she does not need to force herself; her feelings and her enticements are one, though she is aware of both of them!

‘What a beautiful voice, my Kunala; you touch me within the depths of my soul. You enchant me with your veena and your songs!’ Besides the glowing of her eyes, she consciously and unabashedly bares to him all the beauty of her body.

It is as though the enchantment of her laugh not only expresses itself in her features but nestles in the movement of her arms, in the breathing of her chest, in the pose of her willowy legs. Because of the subtleness of his feelings it is as if the love of this woman assails him and, catching him off-guard, smothers him. Startled he rises, putting his instrument aside.

‘Mother Tishya Rakshita!’

Tishya laughs at him, her fingers releasing her muslin cloth and her arms stretching out towards him. Convinced of her irresistible powers, she tempts him with each movement of her lithe body. Kunala’s eyes stare at her. She has no idea of what is happening inside him, closed-off as he is like his old father when they do not want to betray their thoughts. What stops him from taking what is being offered to him! Fear of his father? But has he not gone to Tamralipti with a sapling of that silly Bodhi-tree! Kanchanamala? Her eyes flash, her beautiful mouth puckered to the sweetest, most ensnaring laugh of victory, like the flower gleams for the eager butterfly. She draws closer, the scent of jasmine from her heaving breast is strong.

‘Come, my Kunala, come!’ And she wants to embrace him, tries to force her sylph-like body, shimmering through the thin cloth, on him. ‘Your gaze, your eyes, beguile me!’ she whispers to him. ‘It is as if my body is aflame now I embrace you! Give me ... your youthful love! Come! What stops you from taking me in your arms, all ...’

She sees how Kunala shuts off both his ears. Still she keeps him entwined ...

‘Mother Tishya Rakshita! Do not speak such sinful words to me, the son. You are for me the mother, the Rani of my respected Father! This sin is like blood-shame and would plunge you to the deepest of hells. Even if I would forget my great love for Kanchanamala I would not place the burden of such guilt on myself!’ He wants to gently free himself from her arms but the Rani has still not lost faith in her potent charms. Her gaze pierces his and in hers a wild surrender is gleaming, forgetting all for the mighty passion of her entire being. But his eyes reject her, clearly and earnestly. Then her arms slowly let go of him and she withdraws a few steps. Now she sees that her strongest, most audacious temptation, is rejected by his moral strength, that her seduction does not mean anything to the son of her mighty man, a sudden rage takes possession of her. Kunala sees how the friendly, attractive laugh wilts away, how a demonic energy flares in her eyes and the loveliness of her countenance changes into an ominous grimace of scorn, behind which she tries to hide her disappointment and rage. The shame of her failed scheme that she would not have felt if he had taken her, changes to a hurt pride which assumes in her inflamed mind frightening proportions, and then finds expression in an excessive rage.

‘You spurn me, Kunala, at a moment when my love for you takes possession of me ... when I had, in highest ecstasy, only one longing, for you! You repulse me, when I desire to offer you the highest and mightiest a woman has. Kama, who awakened in me a love of such tremendous power, will not tolerate this. Yama will blow you away from this earth!’ she hisses in her anger.

‘I would rather die than forget my duty and loyalty towards my noble father and my wife. I have, mother Tishya, nothing to do with a life that for the followers of the Tathagata is considered a shame and would make of me a despised and cursed human being! When you have calmed down, mother Tishya Rakshita, you will perceive it as I do.’

Tishya turns her back to him, walks through the gallery with angry steps and disappeared behind the sculptured marble walls of the hall, whose quiet beauty fails to bring her even the slightest peace of mind. She did not anticipate his rejection and now feels the full weight of the danger of the Maharajah coming to know what has happened here at the pond. She shakes her shoulders in impotent rage. What has she to fear? Will that cowardly bigot make life impossible for her here? The old Maharajah! Is it so strange that she wishes to take a bath in the new pond and that the uparaja waylaid her, the most beautiful woman of the anthapura? A demonic laugh rasps through her contorted face. She could kill the coward because for the rest of her life he will threaten her with his morality. Let him hate her! Her hatred is ten times, a hundred times more! She wanted to give him love and he branded her love as a disgrace and insolence. Follower of the compassionate Buddha? Cowardly slave of his mighty father, that is what he is! How could she be infatuated by such an effeminate man! Cowardice of the ... Shudra opposing a Kshatriya! A notemasculated eunuch! A sweet worshipper of monks with his deer’s-eyes, languishing for heaven! Bah! One day she will take revenge. She has to think how! Like a panther she will wait long for her prey that, roaming around unaware, at last will fall into her clutches as he keeps silent. She would love to see those monk-eyes break in his last hour. To laugh when his suffering is complete. He wants to have nothing to do with the life she offered him? He would rather die? Then die! Like the Shudra who refuses to offer his service has to die! Let his troubled mind calm down with the wise Brahmin girl, find peace in her lap, like the newly born Prince. Kanchanamala ...

Suddenly Tishya stops. His sweetheart from the mahavana! Striking at her through him! Have her spit out her hate, her anger into his sanctimonious face, indirectly! The next Agramahisi! When she, Tishya Rakshita, is the forgotten Rani of the deceased Maharajah! Perhaps, he will understand himself that it is wiser to keep silent. No look on her face will betray how she hates him but in her heart she will nurture her vengeance into an ever-growing threat, she will pursue it till his death. She is still a Rani, above Kanchanamala! And she will be the waylaid innocence. For one moment, fear that the Maharajah will believe Kunala takes hold of her. But then triumph reappears on her beautiful features.

A week later, the Maharajah returns from Tamralipti. Karuvaki welcomes him joyfully. Charumati has sent word from Nepal that a son had been born to her: Dasaratha.



KUNALA KEEPS SILENT

Katcha has fled from Tirha. He does not dare to go back to his parental home; he is going West. His father has dreamed of Taxila where he would be able to develop himself further after the pupillage at Santanu's into a priest of great proficiency and erudition. The last time he had not been thinking of it anymore; Kanchanamala would be his wife and then Taxila was out of the question. When he understood that the Shudra, by his power and status, was driven into the arms of Kancha and he by his evil deed had spoiled his future forever, the thought of the holy city came back to his mind again: to reconcile with father by continuing his studies. He does not know how to get there, however. Far, endlessly far to the West! But what does it matter whether he arrives there in a month a year or only after years! Two strong feelings dominates him: revenge on Prince Kunala and irresistible love for Kancha. Away from Tirha, the farther the better! The lesser the chance would be that they will know about him and treat him with scorn. He is certain about the scorn of the gods, although he might purify himself by pilgrimages, by offerings, by dedicating himself to the sacred service of the gods and the Vedas.

He speeds as fast as he can along the road leading to Vaishali, begging for food at the houses of Aryans and no one dares to refuse the brahmacharin a scoop of rice and ghee or a piece of bread. He has learned

to find fruits and roots in the mahavana, and there is water in abundance in the sacred streams and brooks along the way.

After a month of roaming around, he comes across a trade-caravan in Ayodhya that is heading for the West, a couple of camels loaded with silk and fine muslin from Kashi that will be shipped to Egypt for wrapping the dead. Some ox-carts are filled with swords and other iron-ware, cinnamon oil, precious stones, and dyes. They think they will be more secure when a Brahmin journeys along with the caravan and so they do not refuse him a place in one of the carts. They hardly disturb him since he keeps silent, in prayer or meditation most of the time. In his proud heart Katcha is convinced that the blessed one is not he but the caravan, which is only gaining in safety, advantage, and good luck in taking him along.

After some months they arrive in Taxila and it is not difficult for him to take up his study again. In the whirl of old thoughts of the East and the new of the West, Brahmanism is still untouched and a pupil of that school can easily find the support he needs. So, Katcha finds a home with an elderly, sympathetic Brahmin. For a long time Katcha serves him diligently, maintains the fire faithfully and studies seriously the science of the stars and its mystic laws, the healing arts and the Arthavaveda with her magic spells and secret powers. He fulfils all the rites meticulously and yet, it is not those acts that keep his mind busy continuously. Often he climbs the hills, west of Taxila, to search for wood for the holy fires. There, for a long time, he stares at the old and the new town and over the wide hills on the other side of the Tamra Nala, that propels the water from the countless brooks, springs and irrigation-canals beyond Taxila to the Indus, and over the roads where caravans are slowly proceeding from and towards the trading city. He doubts whether he will ever be able to avenge the hated Buddhist, whether he can force Kancha one day to his feet. Every plan fades again from his consciousness. And yet his love rouses him to think of new threats which weave themselves through the prayers meant to purify him of sins. But the desire to meet Kancha again always urges him on because he believes that it was not her love but the prestige of the Prince and the will of Santanu that drove her towards the Prince. It is him she loves! He is a Brahmin, after all! He studies now for a few years in Taxila, with the thought that one day he wants to return to the East to the holy land where Kancha lives.

Vesanta's first flowering has gone, *Caitra*¹ has gone by, and *Vaisakha*² has, with the hotter burning of the sun, warned of the approaching summer. Katcha, gathering wood, takes rest on a fallen tree trunk, and wipes the sweat off his head and neck. While looking around the beautiful countryside his gaze is caught by a camel-caravan that is on the road from Pushkalivati and Kabul proceeding to Taxila. It captivates him. All is gleaming in Surya's bright light. Maybe, it is a royal delegation on the way to the *Kumara*³. The animals walk evidently under capable guidance. Everything gives the impression of riches and wealth. Katcha picks up his bundle of wood for the holy fire and rapidly descends the hill. For a short while he loses sight of the caravan but he knows that he will make it to the junction before them. There he sits down and waits. When they come closer, he stands up. With great interest he looks at the well-tended animals, the magnificent equipment, the precious carpets and cloths. Katcha's dignified bearing seems to impress. The sarthavaha stops and asks in pure Maghadi whether Taxila is still far.

'If you ride around the corner the city is in front of you, sir.'

'How far is the gate?'

'Not yet half a yojana. Is Taxila the final destination of your journey?'

'No, sir, I guide a delegation from Bactria to Pataliputra.'

'A long and dangerous road.'

'They say that the roads in the country of Ashoka are safe.'

The caravan moves on. The young Brahmin remains standing by the side of the road for a while, watching them off sadly. What richness of colour and splendour of gems! The skin of the travellers is light like that of the higher varnas, their bearing distinguished; but they are *Mlecchas*, most likely Macedonians who took Bactria away from Iran.

To Ashoka's capital! He sighs and his imagination soars, flying with wide-spread wings. To the Maharajah, to the palace where Kancha is Yuvarani! And he, here in the far West, as a brahmacharin, a sinner! Wild thoughts stir anew his hatred in mounting waves. What is he doing here, far from Kancha? As a guilty one he has run away from his Guru, far off to the holy city in the cursed land on the other side of the Sarasvati. Long enough has he been away from his holy ground because a Shudra chased him into sin! That sin is now paid for, and more: He will be a Brahmin, exalted above all, enemy of the *Bauddhis*⁴ who level the barriers of the

varnas, enemy of the Maharajah but even more so of the Yuvaraja who stole Kancha's love away from him. Each doubt against his returning is swept away by his hatred and by his love for Kancha. She is a Brahmin, and he, as well. Compared to them any Shudra, even the noblest one, is insignificant.

He enters through the North Gate. On the Main Street the caravan is waiting. The delegation is conducted with respect to the Kumara by the foreigners department. Just as Katcha passes by, the sarthavaha is leaving the palace-gate to take the camels to the stables. In recognition he greets Katcha.

'You said: a dangerous journey. Why, high Brahmin?'

'The desert-sand, the robbers, and the wild animals in the Doab.'

'How can I avoid all these?'

'A swift departure, the safest roads, a Brahmin in your company.'

'You do not make easy conditions, sir.'

'You do not undertake an easy journey. I know the way.'

'Are you from Magadha?'

Katcha nods.

'When are you returning?'

'When there is a good opportunity,' snaps Katcha.

'Travel along with us, sir. What is your name?'

Katcha's eyes glitter. All objections are swept away. A return to the East!

'My name is Katchayana. When will you leave Taxila?'

'Do help us in our decision to choose the right time for departure.'

'Take care that you have left the dangerous dust-clouds of the desert behind you before Jyeshtha ...'

During the long journey through the Punjab and the desert, Katcha enjoys excellent care. Prince Kala, the Viceroy of Taxila, has provided the Bactrians with strong guides, the head of which is Tshunda, who speaks many languages and always helps the Bactrians with great friendliness. Katcha is less reserved with the open Kshatriya than with the foreigners whom he is only able to understand with the sarthavaha as interpreter. They have crossed the Sarasvati and towards nightfall, when the scarlet-red sun sinks down behind the hills in the West, they make camp. The night brings coolness as they sit in front of their tents. Stars twinkle in the sky, spreading a greyish light over the desert. The air is hushed. The animals are freed of

their burdens. The drivers retrieve the food sacks and give the camels handfuls of grains, mixed with beans. The animals, tired as they are, walk around for a while and graze on some hard, sharp grass or else jerk leaves and thorns from the scanty bushes. Soon, they decide to lie down and stretch out their necks and heads, until they calmly fall asleep. The guides from Taxila guard the camp against surprise attacks or wild animals. For Katcha, as usual, is set up a separate tent. He wants to study the starry sky and meanwhile his reveries of Kancha and Kunala play their games with his mind. He feels powerless against the mighty Mauryas. He wants to see Kancha although he knows it will increase his restlessness. His hatred is ridiculous, much like that of a mongoose against an elephant. The sarthavaha approaches him.

‘Orecles, the envoy of Bactria, wishes to speak to you, sir.’

‘Tell Orecles that I will receive him here.’

‘But Orecles ... a brother of the Bactrian king is the owner of the caravan.’

‘I am a Brahmin in the holy country at this side of the Sarasvati.’

Hesitantly, the sarthavaha passes the message across.

‘Well, Tshunda, what do you think of such a barbarian?’

‘Relic of a varna that is sliding down the high mountain only to land in the swamps at its foot.’

Orecles and his nephew, Aristes, approach Katcha’s tent. The sarthavaha is their interpreter, and Tshunda, the silent listener.

‘So, young man, the caravan-camp is my house and does one violate here the first duty of the guest which is to adhere to the rules of the house?’

‘In Aryavarta, the Brahmin is master over all the other people and creation. He eats his own food, wears his own clothes. Other mortals have to be thankful for all that they are and have, even their lives, to the benevolence and generosity of the Brahmins.⁵ So everyone is indebted to my varna. The Brahmin not towards the other.’

Orecles looks mockingly into the arrogant eyes of the proud priest.

‘Your words give evidence of youthful impetuosity or of unbridled pride. Even in Bactria we know that all of the land of India belongs to the Emperor and that he has made that clearly known to your varna.’

‘Maharajah Ashoka has seized power wrongfully.’

‘You are going to Pataliputra and we will see whether you will dare repeat your words before the Emperor.’

Katcha is shaken. ‘I have nothing to do with the Buddhist Emperor.’

‘What does Buddhist mean?’

‘That he is a follower of the Shakyamuni who does not acknowledge the sovereignty of the Brahmins and accepts impure varnas into his sect.’

‘Impure because of their way of life?’

‘No, impure because of their birth!’

Both the Greeks start laughing. ‘Do you, Brahmins, come into the world as different beings? Do you bear signs? Do you take a testimony of the gods along at your birth? Maybe others might not believe it. Is your existence, your death, different from that of all other human beings?’

‘A Shudra is only an animal in human form.’

‘Fortunate the Shudra, who understands the foolishness of your delusion.’

‘He is despised and only has to serve the Aryas. The Maharajah and his son are Shudras.’

‘Fortunately, there is a Shudra who has the power to make such a great land happy in spite of your self-conceit.’

Katcha keeps silent. Aristes feels the irritation of Orecles. But, from the Brahmin, they wish to know who the Emperor is.

‘Is there a relationship between the fact that he is a Shudra and that he became a Buddhist?’

‘He cannot become a Brahmin, at least,’ mocks Katcha.

‘Maybe, for that he is too humane and too broad-minded! The Mauryas come from the western Himalayas and receive envoys like Megasthenes at their court.’

‘What comes from the other side of the Sarasvati is cursed.’

‘Thank you. Why then do you study there and run away from your sacred country?’

Katcha flushes. ‘Taxila is one of our holy cities.’

‘Why then do you, still young, return so fast?’ mocks Aristes.

Katcha keeps silent.

‘The Emperor has a mighty army, does he not?’

‘He does not use it.’

‘Because every country fears it.’

‘He has abandoned all warfare. The Buddha forbids destruction of life.’

‘And if he gets into conflicts with neighbouring peoples?’

‘Then he tries to solve the problems through envoys and missions. To such cowardly methods the third Maurya descends. The fourth may be going as a supplicant to his enemies.’

‘Your bitterness shows that the Mauryas have enemies in their own country as well. Do all the Brahmins hate the Buddha and the Emperor?’

‘Unfortunately, not. Many let themselves be carried away by the teachings of the Buddha, compassion and love for all beings.’

‘So amongst the Brahmins there are still some humane beings.’

‘The gods starve and thirst; the Buddha forbids sacrifices.’

The Greeks, together with Tshunda, leave the sullen Brahmin.

‘Tshunda, you are right. This is a relic of old cast-off thoughts. But the Emperor ...’

‘That does not look too good for our mission,’ Aristes remarks.

‘What courage to carry through such a doctrine in a world empire. Like a Phoibos Apollo, who brands murder as a transgression of the laws of Zeus.’⁶

‘But Diodotos cannot expect support of this Emperor!’

‘Without effort one does not obtain friendship, even less, help.’

‘You have to talk with the Maharajah yourself,’ reassures Tshunda. ‘He is the personification of truth and benevolence. He will meet you with courtesy.’

After Indraprastha the road continues through the lush fields of Madhyadesa, where the prosperity and peace of the people is visibly seen in the countryside. It leaves a great impression on the Greeks, coming from a country where for many years revolt and fighting have disturbed the peace. In every city they pass by, they are firmly regulated but treated and cared for with great friendliness by the foreigners department. There is no arbitrariness in this country; all government institutions work scrupulously and with flexibility which is only possible with people who feel secure in the Emperor’s hand and justice. The interest in Orestes’ caravan is great but not intrusive, maybe too because a Brahmin is part of the company.

When the caravan departs from Kashi, Orecles notices that Katcha is missing.

‘Where has my protector gone?’ he asks mockingly.

‘He took a different road, sir.’ answers Tshunda.

‘How do you know?’

‘I heard about it. Certain people cannot hide themselves from the imperial secret service.’

Orecles looks at him in disbelief. ‘One step off the road and one is lost, Tshunda, in such a great empire.’

‘Do try it, high emissary.’

‘Do they keep an eye on Katchayana?’

‘Most likely they knew where he went to.’

‘Is he dangerous?’

‘No. Former sacrificial priests like to sow intrigue against the Emperor but no one is a match for the secret service.’

‘At least Katchayana could have said a word of thanks for our proper care,’ laughs Aristes.

‘On the contrary, he thinks that you are obliged to him.’

‘Let us offer him our best camel as thanks!’

‘He probably would accept it in full earnestness.’

In Pataliputra, the delegation is received with all honours. They are accommodated in one of the imperial buildings in the park and are told that they will be received by the Maharajah on the following day. At night, Tshunda reports to the Emperor. He has spent the months-long journey well, so that he can inform his Lord fully about the mission.

‘Guide the delegation on its return, too, Tshunda.’

Tshunda bows deeply. ‘I have yet another message, sir. From Taxila to Kashi a young Brahmin travelled along with us. Katchayana. I understood that he was on his way to the capital and was very ill-disposed towards the Mauryas. In Kashi I warned the secret service.’

‘They reported it to me from Kashi. You can keep an eye on the delegation. If need be, ask for help from Maskarin.’

Tshunda leaves and Ashoka summons Maskarin, whom he addressed: ‘Maskarin, in a few days there will come a young Brahmin from Kashi. Katchayana or Katcha. I do not know the purpose of his journey.’

‘The brahmacharin from Tirha? I have read a lipi about him at the mahamatrya. He studies in Taxila.’

‘Right. He has returned together with the delegation of Bactria up to Kashi and comes to Pataliputra. He is hostile to the Yuvaraja, whose wife he desired when he was living in the house of Santanu. Have him carefully watched.’

When Ashoka has heard all the informants, he goes to see Asandhimitra. Tishya Rakshita is with her. She goes up to leave but the Maharajah motions for her to stay.

‘Today there arrived a delegation from Bactria to Pataliputra, and tomorrow they will be received in the Throne hall.’

‘So, the whole court has to be present,’ Asandhi says with a laugh.

‘Certainly, it is better to convince foreign sovereigns of our might rather than fight them with wars. Katcha, who was earlier a brahmacharin with Santanu, travelled along with them.’

‘And now my Raja is worried about his son!’

Ashoka smiles. ‘There is one in India who always understands the promptings of my soul, without me having to express them.’

‘Do you fear a threat, my Ashoka?’

‘Katcha is a sacrificial priest and he hates Kunala.’

‘The Brahmin-court disappeared, in its place the Ashokarama rises high over the towers of Pataliputra as a shining symbol of peace.’

‘As a wise Rani you are correct; I, as a monarch watching over my people ... I can punish Katcha for his evil wrongdoing in Tirha, send him to the mines at the Gandaki.’

‘And strengthen his hate.’

Unwillingly, Ashoka turns away and says sharply: ‘But protect the Yuvaraja from that hatred!’

Asandhi puts her hand on his arm. ‘The Yuvaraja obviously knows how to defend himself against this young Brahmin.’

‘I feel responsible for the happiness of my people. And that is bound up with Kunala’s succession.’

‘In the end you are right, noble Maharajah. Certainly, Kunala’s succession is not beyond doubt for you. You do not have absolute faith in fate and the gods.’

Ashoka always feels that Asandhi understands him. He knows that a weak spot has been revealed in the structure of his government. With great sincerity he has wanted to change the people’s vision on life; he believed

that everyone will recognise 'good' if it is made clear to them. Anyone, whose vision is opposed to his, is still lacking the correct insight. And the one who has to continue his work should be someone who thinks like him and shares his convictions. Kunala! And so humanity will finally be won over. That is why, when danger threatens his beloved son, he feels like intervening, making him forget how he himself had to conquer endless dangers, and triumphed!

Neither of them takes notice of the youngest Rani. She has heard about Katcha in Vaishali but never thought again of the rival of the Yuvaraja. It strikes her now even more that he is her kindred spirit in hatred. Like a tiger before its prey, her hatred is always ready to leap, to sate the hunger for vengeance. Her thoughts and desires harden. Will there ever be a chance to meet Katcha? Two people, both filled with passionate love for one another, discover each other as soulmates. Why should not two, whose hatred is equally strong, be driven towards each other? She cannot leave the palace unnoticed while it is not safe for him to enter.

One day she will meet him. Time will not wear out her thirst for vengeance; only time can help her avenge. Only now does she notice that the Maharajah is looking at her. She starts and smiles at him.

'Well, Tishya, the case touches you, I see. What do you say?'

'Sir, one simple sacrificial priest! You have disposed of thousands.'

'Your word would be a release, Tishya, if Katcha had not by his hatred caused a disaster over all of Tirha.'

'One priest against the Mauryas! Like a wasp against a horse!'

'Right Tishya, one wasp ... and the horseman will crush it!'

Tishya suddenly feels afraid of the eyes of the mighty Maharajah.

The following day, the reception for the delegation takes place with all the pomp and panoply of the imperial court. Ashoka appears in white silken attire, glittering with the most precious gems. Kunala is sitting beside the Maharajah, in a less eye-catching but equally expensive raiment. The ministers, Ranis, army commanders, Princes and Princesses give the hall a look of lustre and distinction, no less than that of the courts of Iran and Egypt.

Beautifully dressed female palace-guards ring the company on the outer columns. Servants with pure white chamara fans wave fresh air towards the Maharajah. Others offer cooling drinks from golden jars. Musicians play

soft music on veenas, flutes and whispering drums, as the delegation enters and strides across the open space.

Orecles stops before the mighty Emperor and the music falls silent. The Greek delivers his eulogy on Ashoka and the King of Bactria in the Greek language. Ashoka answers in Pali, which he has implemented in India with a steady hand as the everyday language of the multifarious peoples. The sarthavaha translates. Then Orecles offers the mighty monarch the gifts of Diodotos. Ashoka thanks him with cordial words and asks him to come during the night to his working quarters, together with Aristes, to talk about the mission.

The first ministers, Radhagupta and Khallataka—whom Ashoka always addresses in important matters—are present at his request, as well as the Yuvaraja. The sarthavaha places himself beside Orecles as a translator.

‘It would please me to listen to the message of your King, highly honoured Orecles.’

‘Bactria is a prosperous country, Your Sacred and Gracious Majesty, a country of large forests and delicious fruits, beautiful juicy grapes from which the sweetest smelling wines are made. The Oxus and its tributaries flow through the luxuriant pastures. Our fields cover the valleys with golden grain. Our meadows are home to many sacred cows. Our horses are more beautiful and swifter than those of the neighbouring countries. Our capital has its well trodden roads to Syria, Egypt and Greece, to Chorasmi, the country of the Scyths, China and Tibet, and across the Parapanisads⁷ to your beautiful India. Our country broke the obligation of tribute to the Seleucides⁸, when Antiochos destroyed his countries by wars with Ptolomeus Philadelphos from Egypt and the king of Antropatene. Our capital, Zariaspa, is the oldest, the mother of all cities. The whole world sends its caravans with a wealth of goods inside its walls. There is, however, one threat to our peace and prosperity: To the North and the East of our beautiful Bactria live the wild horse-people. Although my brother, King Diodotos, compelled Arsases and his brother Teridates, who freed Parthia from the Seleucides, to flee, he fears the Chorasmeans, the Turanians and the Scyths, with their tremendous troops of horsemen. But they do not threaten only our country, but also your kingdoms of Kabulistan, across the Parapanisads, and Arachosia and Gedrosia, not to mention the Punjab. So, it is in your and Diodotos’ common interest, gracious Maharajah, to form a strong power against the horsemen of the

North. Our cavalry is courageous and in large numbers, but you have your powerful war elephants and your archers. Diodotos would like to suggest to you that together we push back the horse-people so that they will be a threat neither to him nor to your Gracious Majesty.'

'Honoured Orecles, I thank your King for the trust that he places in the Maharajah of Aryavarta. I hope that we may be friends for many more years. But tell your King that I led two terrible wars, the first one forced upon me against my own brother, the second because I was threatened by the King of the Kalingas. My mighty armies conquered both. But I experienced the horrors and the degrading shame of causing young flourishing lives to be mowed down like the stalks on your rich fields of grain. Ever since, I have been a serious follower of the Buddha who forbids the destruction of life. I have foresworn war and have discovered a means to settle conflicts in a way that can only honour humanity, by a benevolent and peaceful attitude to life. Around my empire live many peoples. I wish to be friends with them. They should not fear me but trust me. I wish that the noble people of Bactria too will be filled with this same spirit and that this spirit will inspire the horse-peoples at your borders. Why should we not come together and, with benevolence and compassion, do everything to prevent what we would see as 'the sin of sins'? He, who heeds to the Buddha and understands the beauty of his teachings does not start a war anymore but detests war.'

'I want to praise your noble principles, gracious Maharajah, but preach to the lion that he saves the cow out of compassion, what do you think he will do?'

'The human being has his manas, and in the core of his being the seed of the Supreme with which he can, and must, control the crudeness of nature!'

'Preach to the Turanians, the Scyths, that they drive their horses to the meadows and live in peace with other people? They would applaud if Bactria did so and lost its power but solely so that they then can obtain an easier prey! If they know that you or your successors neglect your armies the barbarians will immediately jump on your empire from all sides.'

'I want to spread the doctrine of the Buddha to the whole world by missions. It is the doctrine of compassion that is from the All-powerful and that finally expresses itself in each human being.'

‘The fact that you, noble Maharajah, are a follower of the Buddha proves the greatness of his doctrine. However, our prophet Zarathustra taught us about the good god, Ahura Mazda.⁹ He is all that is contained in goodness, devotion, diligent land-cultivation and obeisance in the highest sense. But opposing Mazda is the world of Anro Mainyn¹⁰ with his evil spirits, the daevas. Sowing grains means practising the law. Where full-grown stalks sway in the wind, the daevas disappear. Our sacred bird is Parodars, the cock, the wake-up caller in the early morning. Mazda is the father of truth and activity; Anro Mainyn the one of deceit and laziness, the source of all evil, injustice, darkness and impurity. The cultivated earth is of Mazda, the wilderness of Anro Mainyn and the daevas. We worship Mazda with offerings and prayer with the sacred fire that lives inside a human being, animal, plant and lightning. The sun is the power of light, which can withstand the daevas. In that way, our religion teaches us, it is a duty to be hard with the enemies, to subjugate the realm of the evil and its servants: The servants-of-the-lie one teaches with the sword!’

‘But does ‘teaching with the sword’ not mean provoking a war? You ask me for elephants and archers to drive back the horse-people. That means war for territory, for conquest. It is not the defence of your hearths; it is attack, a deliberate act of war! Therefore, I will never lend my armies! My stand is: teach the servant-of-the-lie the wisdom of the Buddha, do not destroy life needlessly. Look how prosperity and happiness are spreading out their wide wings over my empire. During my life and after I am gone, I hope!’

‘Would there then be a possibility that King Diodotos could ask of you a considerable number of elephants, noble Maharajah? It must be reassuring to you that there is a strong kingdom separating you from the barbarians in the North.’

‘You will hear my opinion and that of my First Minister Radhagupta, O, Oreclis.’

‘King Diodotos cannot expect of the sacred Maharajah that he sacrifices part of his strength to foreign sovereigns. The elephants together with the archers are the nucleus of our army. India is blessed with this strength that protects it against every enemy. Who knows whether friendliness towards a good neighbour will not turn against us one day?’

‘The priests of Mazda command us to honour honesty, loyalty, truth and purity, noble minister!’

‘We have experienced in India, noble Oreles,’ says Khallataka, who until then has kept silent, ‘that the priests in whom one entrusts the noblest of the spirit always bring ruin upon the country, if their self-interest, which they always identify with the will of the godhead, is at stake. Buddhism does not know priests, merely truthful followers of the Buddha, the greatest of human beings.’

‘You, too, have your priests, a young Brahmin told me.’

‘He is a sacrificial priest and an enemy of the sacred Maharajah who leads our people to peace and happiness.’

Oreles keeps silent for a moment. Has not Tshunda told him the same? ‘Purity in the material world, and purity of the inner being, by right thoughts, right words and right deeds. So our priests teach us.’

‘No living being should be killed needlessly because all life is sacred, embraced by the compassion of the Buddha.’

‘With such lofty principles, noble Maharajah, you surrender your country to the servants of Anro Mainyn.’

‘Except when the Dharma is brought to the whole world,’ opines the Emperor. ‘He who understands the Dharma, accepts it. That is my experience in India.’

‘Bactria will never give up the beautiful doctrine of Zarathustra for your prophet, the Buddha. But the horse-riding people of Mid-Asia ...’ Oreles looks up at the Maharajah with an ominous gaze ... ‘they will invade your empire, when the Emperor will no longer be able to fall back upon a great armed force. You refuse Diodotos’ hand and to that you are entitled, it may even be your duty. But one day possibly, India will curse your decision.¹¹ Will the Buddha then remain their prophet, noble Maharajah?’

‘King Diodotos wants to annex Sogdiana and Margiana to his kingdom, I have heard, honourable Oreles. I wish friendship with my neighbours but not in the way that I have to join them in taking up arms.’

Oreles is startled. Then he understands that the Emperor is informed by others as well, not just himself.

The delegation of Diodotos has long since left the capital. Ashoka did not let the opportunity pass to display the power of his army; even more, the

works of peace, including the industrious diligence in the capital, the building of canals for irrigation, and a thriving agriculture. But the emissary of the blatantly expansionist country and the Maharajah could not come to an agreement about the importance of the army in the polity.

‘It is an oppressing thought, my Father,’ says Kunala one night, as he reposed in Ashoka’s working chamber. ‘No one who listens to your vision about the change in outlook and attitude of mankind believes in its realisation.’

‘Is this not how every great reform in the world proceeds, my son? Faith and trust are the basic conditions. India prospers. The Buddha preached a turning of the will by which the selfishness of the cravings of nature would be conquered, actually bound, which leads to a higher sense of humanity. I do believe in that. Does it not seem as though the world has been waiting for this? The spirit of the Buddha permeates my empire with a rapidity and force that surprises everyone, including myself! Lanka follows our example. And so will other peoples to whom my missions reach out.’

‘And if your empire weakens and a savage people forces its way in?’

‘What is it that then falls, the army? Not the country itself! Not the spirit of the Buddha! That is founded on eternal values, eternally rising up again—even when they are suppressed—until the whole of humanity grows in wisdom and refuses to start a war. Centuries are seconds in eternity. Darius fell because of his wars. Alexander has fallen. Kalinga has fallen. Maybe, humanity will grow towards wisdom after the fall of the greatest tyrant.’

‘But will not the demonic nature in mankind always rise again? That, which does not consider the endless suffering brought about by ghastly mistaken ideas? And if that is coupled with power ... I know demons, too, Katcha and ...’

‘They cannot rise up to the spirit of a Sayana, a Khallataka, the Buddha,’ Ashoka interrupts him before Kunala has even mentioned the name of Tishya Rakshita, as he intended to do. ‘If ever a demon would seize power, he will call up powers in humanity which will eventually destroy him.’

‘Our peoples are like nature in Vesanta but under the blades of grass lurks the cobra!’

‘And what do you want to do, Yuvaraja?’

‘For me, obeisance to you is the highest commandment!’

Over days and nights, Kunala has pondered whether he should let his father know what had happened in the stone wing. He rarely meets Tishya Rakshita. When she is in the anthapura whenever he visits his mother, she soon disappears. He thinks she is avoiding him because she feels remorse; Kancha thinks it is because she hates him. She avoids his gaze. Kancha believes she is a demon and she fears her and her influence. Should he warn his father? Or, is it really necessary to disturb him with something that flared and died like a flame in the rain? Is it not as if his father himself did stop him from speaking a moment ago? Kunala keeps silent.

The Emperor wants to visit the army camp. Karuvaki prepares to accompany him. But when the Emperor wants to invite Tishya as well, Karuvaki's joy goes away and she pleads with Ashoka: 'Please allow me then to stay in the anthapura, noble Maharaja.'

Ashoka looks up, surprised. 'Why this change of mood?'

'It is difficult for me to explain to Your Majesty.'

'Is it possible that my jungle-bride poorly controls unworthy feelings? Is it your jealousy or do you believe yourself to be better than a former servant?'

'Neither. She is a Kshatriya like Padmavati and I from the jungle. But she lacks the qualities which we appreciate. Maybe, her subordinate position has had a bad influence on her. She and I do not fit well together.'

'I regret that. Yet, I request you to join and ride with her on one elephant. Maybe, you will start appreciating her. One has to overcome petty feelings, my Karuvaki.'

'My Lord's request is for me a command.'

Tishya does not object. Ashoka notices that her demeanour towards Karuvaki is haughty and he sees Karuvaki's attitude as a certain envy for the favourite friend of Asandhi.

'When are you going back to Kausambi?' asks Tishya with a flickering in her eyes that never fails to perturb Karuvaki.

'When people irritate me so much that I prefer to live at the Jamuna.'

'Does not the holy Maharajah decide that?' Tishya asks even more haughtily.

'Fortunately a gentle, reasonable and well-meaning man decides that ... and not you!' she snaps.

‘The Kausambi-rani seems to be annoyed with me. Maybe, she lacks the composure and the willingness of our Lord.’

‘Our Lord, too, knew people who could not count on that. Did you hear about Devaka and Shakuni?’

Tishya turns pale. Her temper flares but she realises that she has to remain in control. Both keep quiet for a long time.

As they approach the camp, the heavy clanging of the gong sounds and immediately many are hurrying towards the main road, where thousands of warriors line up to welcome the imperial family. The war-elephants and horses are arrayed in long lines when the Maharajah rides up to the headquarters. The Yuvaraja greets his father and both the Ranis with courteous words. Karuvaki is friendly and happy, while Tishya’s face remains unmoved. To please the Ranis the Maharajah orders the war games which are going on in the camp to continue. The two royal elephants stand beside each other at the end of the great camp and Karuvaki follows with obvious interest each swerve and turn, in the direction of the agile ranks.

‘Well, noble Maharajah, can you merely watch and not participate in such a fascinating game?’ she asks excitedly.

Ashoka smiles at her. ‘For over thirty years, I was commander of the troops, Karuvaki. Since then I have been compelled to leave such strenuous games to the younger ones. Once, my father had brought the Gandiwa bow. I arched it and shot. In those days that meant something, maybe not for me, but for my father.’

‘Has the Yuvaraja ever arched the Gandiwa and shot it?’

‘No, why?’

‘Because it is nice, such an old superstition ...’

‘We will ask him to let fly the Gandiwa-arrow for you. Kunala is a good archer. He has the old warrior-blood!’ Ashoka has his full attention on the battle. He and Karuvaki, in brief yells of enthusiasm, demonstrate their support. But Tishya is seeing everything through the haze of her hatred. On every happy intervention of the Yuvaraja she looks as if regretful, on every failure, in joy. Finally, when Kunala leads his elephants to victory, Karuvaki joins others in the cheering: ‘Hail to the Yuvaraja!’ Just by chance she looks into the eyes of the youngest Rani which are aflame in a face contorted by malevolent regret. Upset, she turns her back on her. What is possessing this woman!

‘That is your true son, my Maharajah!’ she says compassionately.

Ashoka is content, and laughs. The Yuvaraja approaches them. In fact the Maharajah has cast aside superstitions long ago. Does he still believe in the Gandiwa? No! And yet, it would give him a feeling of comfort if Kunala could wield the bow like he had done. It is foolishness! The test means nothing. Is not Kunala the undisputed successor? Yet, he wants the test to be held. Kunala has to be like him! For the welfare of his people!

‘My son, I congratulate you on this good game.’ Then he turns to Pata: ‘Bring the bow of Arjuna here.’ Soon, the warriors respectfully bring him the sacred weapon.

‘Behold, my son, show us that you will rule Aryavarta,’ says the Maharajah, more honest than his father, who had said to him ‘... that you are able to rule.’

Kunala examines the bow with a sharp eye. ‘It is rotting, my Father,’ he says at last, disappointed.

Ashoka laughs: ‘Arch it and shoot!’

Kunala knows the story of Ashoka’s shot. He takes the enormous weapon in his hands. It is not possible to deal with such a bow in the ordinary way. Like his father had once done, he asks for two boulders and places the tips of the bow between them. He takes hold of the bow-string, stamps on the bow to pull the string, but the wood has lost its strength and breaks apart under his foot. People start in superstitious fear. The Yuvaraja himself laughs.

‘I had expected it, my Father, the legend is shattered.’

Ashoka regrets his order. The Buddha looked with disfavour on each attachment to supernatural powers. ‘The spell of the old legend broke under the power of time. Have Arjuna’s bow repaired and put away in the armoury, Patta.’

Disappointed, Karuvaki looks up. ‘What a pity, my Lord, that such a nice symbol too has to go the way of all matter.’

‘I have had buildings of wood replaced by buildings of stone, my Karuvaki, because the earlier ones are as perishable as the bow of Arjuna. What remains eternally? Maybe, only the thought ... I wish it for the empire of the Mauryas, and that is, who knows, maybe not even desirable!’

There is one who, in total lack of control, airs out her feelings: Tishya Rakshita. She lets out a brief burst of laughter, then falls quiet, alarmed.

Ashoka's countenance remains unmoved, Karuvaki nods understandingly. Kunala's serious gaze makes Tishya look away.

'I have not yet arched the bow, noble Maharajah.'

'Good, choose yourself a weapon and a target.'

Effortlessly Kunala, from a long distance, lets fly an arrow from a huge army bow into the heart of a disc. The warriors cheer, Karuvaki, too. For a brief moment Tishya's lips tremble.

'Allow me a shot, too, Lord,' Karuvaki calls out recklessly.

'You are allowed, my Rani,' says Ashoka, happy that his thoughts take a different turn.

She climbs down from the elephant with the help of Kunala. He takes a light bow and hands it over to mother Karuvaki. From a short distance she lets fly an arrow that also hit the centre.

'Two masterly shots! Does Tishya Rakshita wish to shoot?'

'Thank you, Lord,' she answers haughtily.

'Do you permit Tulya to shoot, Father?'

'With pleasure! Come near, Tulya.' The hunter takes the heaviest war-bow, determines the distance nearly twice as far as Kunala's, and shoots. The iron head of the arrow flies so strongly into the disc that the wood is torn apart. Everyone looks surprised for a while, not in the least, the Maharajah.

'Come and see me tomorrow night, Tulya.'

'Where did you learn to shoot like this, Tulya?' asks Karuvaki.

'In the woods of Tirha, noble Rani.'

'Karuvaki, you accompany me while riding back. Kunala will keep Tishya company.'

Tishya is frightened.

'Unfortunately I have still some work to do in the camp, my Father. So, I shall have to miss the company of mother Tishya.'

'I expect you tomorrow in the parishad, my son.'

Karuvaki is happy with the beautiful ride and shares a pleasurable chat with the Maharajah. When she wishes to make a remark about Tishya's demeanour, the Maharajah raises his hand and smiles. Tishya sits alone in the howda and is happy that Kunala is prevented. She is angry with herself, though, because she did not keep herself under better control. Fortunately, those two cannot shout out their joy and pride in the palace because of the

Gandiwa! Will this ... coward, one day become the Maharajah! May Shiva prevent it for as long as possible! Kunala despises her! That is why he refused to join her while riding back! The bow of Gandiwa broken! Who says it is a false symbol? She, Tishya Rakshita, wants to console herself because of her hatred for the Shudra! What do they know of their fate, of their former incarnations?



Part 2

THE YOUNGEST RANI

THE VICEROY OF TAXILA

In the meeting of the parishad all members, including the mahamatras, are present. The Yuvaraja takes his place beside the Maharajah. It is at the end of Sharad when the fruits had ripened. All doors and windows are closed, signalling that the people are expecting an important message of the Maharajah. He addresses them thus:

‘Members of the Parishad, for several months now there has been unrest in Taxila. The messages I received indicate that it is mostly the Yavanas¹ who are causing the viceroy trouble. I do not think there is an immediate threat of a revolt, yet the situation worries me. We know that the Taxilans are all too eager to show their dissatisfaction. We must swiftly bring it to an end. I intend to go myself to the capital of the West.’

‘Is it necessary for Your Majesty yourself to go to Taxila? It could be a matter of more than a year; it has happened more often that a Crown Prince was sent there when the situation was tense,’ remarks Radhagupta.

‘But I believe that I will be able to quickly restore peace there, Radhagupta.’

‘Is the situation of such little danger, noble Maharajah? If this is the case it could as well be appropriate to send the Yuvaraja as it is customary

to delegate Princes to govern and command the army in certain parts of the empire,' another member of the parishad, Parana, reflects aloud.

Ashoka has indeed pondered for a long time whether or not he should entrust Kunala with the task. In the end, his worries about the safety of his son made him decide to go himself. For him, threats of danger were at one time everywhere, but he never left anything to chance. Besides, he had Revata. Will Kunala be able to cope with the political machinations? Will he be able to prevent, or even wish to prevent, a war? Or, does the blood of adventurous ancestors still run within him? It is not a wild urge within that characterises Kunala's being, but the love for his father, and the veneration of the Buddha that inspire him. Is that why he, Ashoka, wishes to protect him and clear from his path all that could harm him or place him in danger? Certainly that is a strong feeling in him. Yet, the future Maharajah has to conquer that which threatens and defies him, by himself!

'Such little danger you say, noble Parana! I am not really sure of that. Listen, Diodotos is eager for the land of his neighbours. He wants to add Sogdiana north of his country to his possessions and in the West the rich oasis of Margiana. In the south-west he desires Aria, too. Bactria is but a frontier post, a toehold, and thus too weak, thinks Diodotos. Antiochos II cannot hold off the third Ptolomeus of Egypt who is threatening his Syria. In Bactria one fears that the victorious Egyptian will take their country as well, maybe destroy it. Moreover, the peoples of the north of Bactria present a threat. I do not wish to participate in all these wars out of greed, my army has to protect our security, no more. But parts of my own empire are endangered by the unrest caused by the *mlechas* of Bactria in our western states. In particular the Yavanas are the ones who stir up trouble in Taxila and Kabul. Therefore, I see myself being forced to send a strong army to the West for the safety of our borders, especially to prevent a war.'

'When your motivation is a war of conquest, noble Maharajah, a commander of your ability and experience should go to the West. Under the given circumstances there is every reason for the Yuvaraja to be sent.'

Ashoka hesitates. 'What does the Yuvaraja say?'

'When the noble Maharajah wants to entrust me with an assignment like this, I will with all my powers try to put an end to the unrest in the West, making it clear to Diodotos and Ptolomeus that one cannot wage a war against the Emperor of India with impunity.'

The parishad keeps quiet as they agree with the answer. Ashoka looks at his son with loving eyes. He reflects thoughtfully a while and the parishad waits respectfully. Finally the Emperor says: ‘Well, then, my son, I charge you with this task and appoint you as commander and the Kumara of the North-west. Does the parishad agree with this?’

The Parishad keeps silent.

In the evening, the Maharajah has important meetings to attend. The first one to enter is Tulya, whose whole being is dedicated to the Yuvaraja.

‘The Yuvaraja departs soon to Taxila, Tulya.’

‘Is it for a long time, noble Maharajah?’

‘Maybe for years, if my death will not bring him back earlier.’

‘So I too, will go to Taxila, Lord.’

‘I wish it so, Tulya. At one time my best servant and friend was Revata, who had only one ambition: to protect me with his life against any enemy. Therefore, I want such a servant for the Yuvaraja, one who will always stand by him and protect him. The Yuvarani goes along with her spouse. So Diti can accompany you.’

‘I thank you for your trust, Lord,’ Tulya says, quietly.

‘I only demand one thing, Tulya. You are strong and an excellent archer; you know the dangers that threaten from people around. You will be in charge of the Yuvaraja’s safety and have to personally intervene or when necessary warn him.’

‘But ... the Yuvaraja, Lord!’

‘I give you the royal mandate and I appoint you as chief. You do not serve with the army but at any moment when you feel it necessary, you will have a unit of a hundred warriors at your disposal.’

‘Does the Yuvaraja know about this, Lord?’

‘I will let you know before your departure, Tulya. Swear that you will make use of this mandate only if in your judgement the safety of the Yuvaraja requires it.’

‘I swear, Lord.’ He is touched by the trust of the Maharajah.

The dharma-mahamatra, Kesala, then enters the work-chambers for his own audience with the Maharajah. He is accompanied by the mission-mahamatra of Gandhara², Amita, and a lipikara. The first minister Radhagupta and the old and wise minister Khallataka have come in as well. When all are seated the Emperor says:

‘I wish that in Gandhara, by the road leading from Bactria over Kabul to Taxila, rock-edicts will be carved into stone. King Diodotos wants to enlarge his kingdom; he is war-like and has influence upon the Yavanas in my north-western provinces. I think it necessary to make it clear to the many travellers and traders to Taxila, how the Maharajah thinks to bring happiness to India. Well, Kesala?’

Shortly after Ashoka became a Buddhist, Kesala had left Ujjain and had become a bhikshu. He visited many monasteries until Ashoka appointed him as abbot of the Veluvana. From then on he did not lose sight of Kesala. The abbot became the first dharma-mahamatra appointed by the Maharajah. Where a yukta is accused of asking too high land levies or a rajuka takes too little care of rivers and canals, or where a pradesika acts inhumanely as a judge and a governor, Kesala is sent. And Ashoka knows that the cases will be dealt with in the most fair and humane way.

‘The mission-mahamatra Amita is familiar with the northern Punjab, Lord.’

‘Well, Amita, I want the edict about the Kalinga-war to be carved, along with some others, to point out to the people the folly of wars of conquest or of starting a revolt against India.’

‘On my journeys, noble Maharajah, I have always been looking out for the right rock formations for your lipis. On the Kabul-road, near Kapurdigiria, where stands a tower high upon a hill, is a rock that is twelve paces in length, five in height and five paces wide, which can be seen from the far-off valley and which looks down at Shabazgarhi. This rock will serve the purpose and suit your Gracious Majesty.’

‘Good, Amita. And you, Kesala, construct there at the same time a vihara and a rest-house for travellers so that the monks can read, translate and explain the lipis for them, at any hour. I wish that especially there, the people hear about my view. The following lipi³ shall be carved in the rock:

‘Eight years after the consecration of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty⁴, the Kalingas were conquered. One hundred and fifty thousand men were taken captive and deported; a hundred thousand were slain and many times as many died as result of the war.

After the Kalingas were conquered H.M.’s observance of the Dharma, his love for the Dharma and his propagation of the Dharma became stronger. The Emperor felt remorse for having

conquered Kalinga. Where an independent country is subjected by force there will be as a result killing, death, and deportation of people, what is now looked upon by H.M. as very painful and deplorable. And H.M. considers this as even more grievous because there live Brahmin and sraman ascetics and followers of other sects and vanaprasthas, who are well established in obeisance to superiors, to parents and teachers, good conduct and firm devotion to friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, servants and slaves. They in particular are hit by the humiliation, killing, and the taking away of their beloveds.

If disaster hits their friends, companions, helpers and relatives, for whom they feel undiminished love, this suffering becomes theirs too, although they themselves are saved from the disaster. So, these disasters strike all people alike, but are felt most painfully by H.M. There is no place in any country where people have no faith in one or another religious creed.

Therefore, if even a hundredth or a thousandth part of all who were wounded, killed or deported in Kalinga would suffer, this would today be considered as very regrettable by H.M.

Nay, even if anyone does mischief, what can be forgiven by H.M. it will be forgiven by H.M. Even those forest peoples, who have been brought under the rule of H.M., he tries to win for his path and way of thinking. But it should be known that, in spite of his regret, H.M. has the power to punish, so that they may have remorse of their crimes and may hope not to be killed. H.M. wishes for all living beings that they will be free of distress and will live with self-control, impartiality and gentleness.’⁵

Well, noble ministers, give me your appraisal.’

Khallataka begins. ‘Our holy friend Sayana would be touched deeply by this lipi, Lord, because of its noble feelings which are so clearly expressed by your Gracious Majesty. For me, however, it remains a question of whether royal supremacy will not suffer through a proclamation of regret about your deeds. The peoples of India look upon you as the Sacred, Almighty Emperor. Is it not better, for the sanctity of your might, that people see you as infallible, that the Kalinga war was the result of your own wise decision? Would it not harm the urge towards obedience to the

imperial power, when people see in you a mortal being who takes decisions about which he later feels remorse? I know you have, and always have had, very lofty thoughts about your great task, and that people had thrust you into the Kalinga-war, but let all other peoples fear your might! They could see your remorse as weakness.'

'It is precisely the Kalinga-war, revered Khallataka, which has taught me that I am just as little infallible as anyone else. The Buddha was no god but a human being with the most sacred of principles. Has he ever kept silent—out of fear that he would be less respected—that he regretted the life of his youth? Like him I will not yield one step away from truth, because I want to impart to my peoples truthfulness as something noble and beautiful. If I have remorse, everyone may know that it has brought me on the right path, so that they, too—out of regret about wrong deeds—will choose a different path, a right one. I flatter myself with the hope that if the Maharajah of India regards compassion as the most beautiful flourishing of the human mind, his subjects will endorse and themselves practise compassion with all beings, and inculcate this in their children. Were I infallible then their endeavour would miss the power of the potential. I want to be their example!'

That very moment a *prativedaka*⁶ is announced. He has come back to Pataliputra from the North-west. Prativedakas always have an immediate admittance to Ashoka even if the Emperor is partaking of a meal, or is in the anthapura, in the farms, camps, parks or even in the *vinita*.⁷ Even the parishad is interrupted so that the Maharajah can be instantly told of the messages from his countries.

'Sire, I have just arrived from Taxila.'

'Kusha, when did you leave the city of the insurrection?'

'One month ago, noble Maharajah.' Ashoka nods his approval. 'Then it was half a month ago that I had left Bactria as a sathavaha. There I learned that King Diodotos was annoyed by the failure of Oreles' mission. Straightaway he gave the orders to march on and subdue Sogdania, and to take over the rich oasis of Margiana. Oreles had to use all his persuasive skills to convince him to leave Arya as it was, because the territory is under the sovereignty of the Maharajah of India.'

'Did Diodotos not fear our army?'

'After your refusal he called it 'a troop of compassionate Buddhists'.'

‘And the people of Bactria?’

‘I have come across much friendliness and openness; I was generous with the many medicines and medicinal herbs for the sick amongst men and animals. On your order I had taken along several camel loads from the imperial gardens of Mathura and Taxila. We talked much about the Teachings of the Buddha, praised it, but with a smile they stated that the Buddha evidently was a sage but that Zoroaster was a great and divine prophet.’

‘Take a rest, Kusha, and take your messages to the mahamatrya.’

‘You see, noble ministers, strict measures are needed in Taxila and only a strong army will impress the king of Bactria.’

‘Do you want war, Lord?’ Kesala asks, surprised.

‘No, I am convinced that Bactria will be on its guard not to take up arms against us. And I do not wish to embark on a war out of ambition. The only victory that I seek is the one of Dharma. Listen.’ And the Emperor reads the concluding portion of the edict wherein he praises the victory of the Dharma, the moral victory as the only proper one for his successors as well.

All remain silent, impressed by Ashoka’s idealism, which comes across to them like a voice from the beyond. They know too well that there always has been disunity in India and not only according to the tales of the *Mahabharata* but Chandragupta and also Bindusara—the conqueror of enemies!—waged war after war. The Kalinga war is still fresh in their memories. Now they are hearing again about the great wars of the Selucides in Iran with Ptolomeus of Egypt. Parthya and Bactria are fighting for their freedom and wish to expand their territory. Turanians and Scyths threaten Bactria ... As if men are beasts of prey! And the Emperor of India maintains peace which he wishes to spread all over the world. He forbids rudeness, offences, the killing of men and animals, so as to urge mankind to a life on a higher plane. They could feel the emotion of their great Emperor. Is it possible that the faith, the will, the power of their Sacred Majesty will extend that far? Kesala and other Dharma-mahamatras believe in the inexhaustible will and ability of the Emperor. That belief sustains them in their tasks, as they travel from place to place, to teach and to persuade the subjects of the doctrine of Dharma of the Buddha, provide alms for all those for whom the struggle for life is too hard, soften harsh legal proceedings, set right injustice with a firm hand, so will it Ashoka! India turns to the Emperor, to his tolerance and lenience, but what about other countries?

Such a beautiful fantasy, peace on earth. Radhagupta does not feel at ease, though.

‘But when the influence of the Buddha has prepared the way to the heart of Antiochos, it will prove to be fatal to him. His empire will be pounced upon from three sides and be torn asunder. India is a huge country but our army has lost a considerable number of warriors who chose the path of the Buddha. And the more the warriors take their refuge in the Buddha, the more the army will weaken. What do we know about the Turanians, the Scyths⁸ and the Chinese? And what if there rises a new Alexander?’

‘Our army will remain strong and vigilant as long as we have ministers like you, my Radhagupta, and sages like my great friend Khallataka. I wish to enhance the primacy of Buddha’s doctrine with all the strength that is given to me, with all the revenues that have been placed in my hands, with all the goodwill and compassion that I feel for the suffering mankind and the suffering animal-world. A powerful army will soon bolster the West as sentinels of our peace and of the higher values we have acquired. Prince Kunala will lead and control it.’

When Ashoka and Kunala stay behind alone, the young Raja kneels down and kisses the hem of Ashoka’s cloak. ‘My Father, I hope you may rule our great empire for a long time yet. Your mighty and lenient hand, is like the one of a magician’s, who, with a touch of one wand, made all flourish and laugh in the world, and with another one made all weep and suffer. But the last one he buried deep down into the earth and covered it with heavy rocks.’

‘When this is your conviction then you are ready to take over my work. How big will be the army to Taxila?’

Ashoka is reminded how, many years ago, he had pleaded to be allowed to take with him as few troops as possible to Taxila. Now he himself is trying to make the army of Kunala strong, to provide support for his son.

‘Resolve not to wage a war but to avert it through courteous agreement. We want peace.’

‘I act in your spirit, my Father, because I too hate war, but more than you I fear that our endeavours are being seen as weakness.’

‘It is weakness to pick up arms if war can be prevented through wisdom. It is war itself that is a weakness, a poverty of the spirit, and a coarseness of the mind, which casts the human being back into the arms of

brutish nature. You are strong when you impel the enemy into your own attitude of benevolence. Bitter experiences force me to safeguard mankind from the madness of a war. My lips are the fruit of much remorse and of a conviction for which I paid a high price!’

‘I feel weak, my Father, when I think of what you expect from me.’

‘Obedience in one’s youth, eager surrender to a lofty goal when one ripens into manhood, acting with wisdom when one has become a man ...’ He put his arm around Kunala’s shoulders.

‘May the gods help me to obey you, my Father.’

‘The gods help those who have a will of their own. My will helped me to overcome the doubts of my own father, the murderous machination of my enemies, the innumerable objections of my friends. Blind obedience excludes the manas that determine the human will. Never forget that. I do not command you. I am merely curious about what you decide.’

Kunala’s army crossed the Ganga. In the early morning he and Kanchanamala bid farewell to the anthapura and to their little son, whom they had to leave behind. This is very hard especially for Kanchanamala. The Maharajah deems it necessary that Kunala’s son be educated under his watchful eyes, the Maharajahs are responsible for the well-being and woe of their people. With loving eyes he looks at both his children, who, earnestly and deeply moved, go from one to the other and exchange friendly words. Even Asandhimitra allows herself to be brought to the great hall in a palanquin.

‘Well, Yuvaraja,’ she says, looking at the Prince with favour, ‘you are going to the country that your great father conquered with his heart. I will be happy to hear that, one day, they will let you go with tears of regret. Your father expects of you that you will grow over there from a young sapling into a beautiful bodhi-tree which will be venerated because of the serenity and the peace it is pouring into the hearts of those who settle themselves trustingly under its lovely, shady branches.’

‘My Father is my Guru, mother Asandhimitra. His lessons have wound themselves around my manas like the light of Surya around the earth. I can only be like the earth, receiving the gift of heaven and bringing it to life.’

‘Modesty is a great virtue, my son,’ she laughs. ‘It depends on the human being himself whether he becomes a blissful deva or a follower of Mara. And you, Kancha, have left the Bhagavati, ‘the bliss-bringing one’,

like I did once upon a time the Sarayu. The Bhagavati cools the hard rocks in its stream. We women are like guards at the gate of the holy city, we take care that no ungodly spirits enter.' The two young people kneel and kiss the hem of her cloth: 'Be blessed with your tasks, my children!' Then, tired, she lies down.

Overcome with emotion, Padmavati embraces her son and daughter, and blesses them without saying a word.

'We will be with you in thought,' says Karuvaki. 'I will console your mother when you have gone.'

'Thank you, mother Karuvaki.'

Kunala looks around. 'Is mother Tishya Rakshita not here?'

'Tishya sends her greetings and bids you a good journey. She suffers from a severe headache,' Asandhi hastens to say.

'She is everywhere where she should not be and appears not where she ought to be,' Karuvaki whispers to Padmavati. Kunala and Kancha overhear her remarks. Does Karuvaki know what took place in the stone-wing? Kancha is happy; Tishya arouses fear and aversion in her.

'May she soon become well again, mother Asandhimitra. May the gods protect you and bring you happiness,' Kunala wishes her. Asandhi watches them pensively.

The city, true to custom, sends off their revered Yuvaraja and his Rani. Blossoms of jasmine, kovidari and bandhujiva rustle, softly whispering, through the air, as if they wish to express the silent utterances of the hearts of the subjects. A wealth of flowers rains down from windows and rooftops upon the howda and its occupants. The imperial elephant strides stately towards the Ganga.

With wistful eyes Kanchanamala looks over the crowds on either side of the road. She starts, two eyes are fixed on her. A young priest is silently standing, alone, behind the other onlookers, who are still overcome with shuddering reverence for the holy Brahmins. He looks intently at her as though he wants to compel her eyes towards him. The blood drains from her cheeks and then suffuses into a deep blush over her face.

'Katcha!' she whispers urgently. The Prince looks Katcha straight in the eyes.

'How nice of him to see us off,' he smiles at her. Then he directs his gaze to the elephants which swerves from the Ganga-gate towards the river.

On the other side of the Ganga the troops are waiting for the Kumara who will lead them on the long journey to Taxila. Along with Karuvaki, Ashoka accompanies the couple for a few *yojanas* and will later return. The Emperor's concern makes him silent. He could have sent one of his brothers as a commander but that would have been viewed generally as imprudent. Who can bear to touch success and yet keep his hands off from grasping the supreme power and not eliminate the one who bars his way! Even sons ... Ajatashatru ... Kunala? Ashoka smiles at the mere thought that his son would seize power in the West.

Karuvaki has been closely watching him for a while. 'My Lord feels it as a great grief that he has to hand over his beloved son to the West,' she says earnestly.

'Yes, that it certainly does, my Karuvaku. May he be a good Kumara! I do trust him but I fear danger. My love concerns his affability and his inner views to life.'

'Do you not place all your chances on one throw of the dice, Lord?'

Ashoka smiles. 'He has a son! Moreover, Charumati has given birth to a son. Yet, I reluctantly hand over Kunala to the caprices of fate, which to me always showed its favour.'

'The Sangha does attract many of your best subjects. But those who are not joining the Sangha often determine the measures taken in your lands.'

'I have no complaints against my employees.'

'Amongst those, who are not chosen, are many who wait for a ruler who selects less astutely than you, Lord.'

'Do you not think this number is decreasing steadily? The doctrine does have its influence on other sects as well.'

'There are people who are not open to what is good. A demon never becomes a deva. Not every Raja is an Ashoka, or every Rani an Asandhi.' In the eyes of Karuvaki appears a glow that Ashoka immediately understands.

'You fail to appreciate the youngest Rani, my Karuvaki.'

Karuvaki starts. 'The incarnation of Shiva', they called him once upon a time. His truthfulness compels him to look unpleasant things straight in the face and never to turn away from it. She knows that.

'Why was she not present at the farewell? Why does she always leave the anthapura when the Yuvaraja enters? Why is Padmavati happy that her

son is leaving? Why is it that Kancha wants to have nothing to do with her? I am not even talking about myself, Lord!’

‘Asandhimitra loves her dearly. Nothing justifies the judgement of you or your friends. So, I know only one explanation. Jealousy against Tishya Rakshita because of Asandhi’s love and trust.’

‘Nobody is jealous of Kancha who is regarded highly by Asandhimitra.’

‘Tishya has been a servant but I wish that other Ranis consider her as an equal because of her birthright, her love for Asandhi, and my choice,’ Ashoka remarks, somewhat sharply and tense.

Karuvaki fails to understand why the Maharajah is so blind with regard to the youngest Rani.

‘Lord, do you believe in demons that hide their anger and their hatred behind captivating charm?’

‘But Karuvaki! This way you can make the sweetest person a suspect! It is your hatred!’ replies Ashoka, annoyed.

‘I hide my feelings for no one, neither do I pretend friendliness. So, my hate is not demonic! My father lost the battle against you but was struck by your magnanimity; now he is one of your most loyal subjects, Lord. Tishya Rakshita comes from a line that always strives for power and will not disdain any means to seize it.’

‘Return to Kausambi, Karuvaki, the new palace is ready and waits for its lady. In the half-quarter of the moon I will take you there. I want to know how the army fares when it crosses the Jamuna at Mathura. And I wish quiet and peace in the anthapura, for Asandhi.’

‘There was peace before Tishya Rakshita became Rani. However, I do look forward to going back to my lovely Kausambi ...’

Ashoka often thinks about his talk with Karuvaki; he knows her to be a sincere woman, but he relies upon the judgement of Asandhi.

A few weeks later they depart for Kausambi. During the journey the Maharajah is very good-humoured. Karuvaki believes that his happiness comes because he will meet Kunala yet in Mathura. The Rani feels revitalised after the depressing days in Pataliputra.

‘You are enjoying this trip, my Karuvaki.’

‘Yes, Lord. I love to ride on horses, you know that. I have once told you that in Anga Surya delights. In Pataliputra his light gets clouded in the dust from the roads and the tensions of the anthapura. Kausambi bathes in his

mild rays, in the fresh air of the Doab-jungle and the song of the Ganga as it comes down from the snowfields of the Himalayas, Shiva's abode.'

'Asandhi loves Pataliputra.'

'Because her thoughts soar high above those of all the small souls and because the noble thoughts of my Lord which all in the anthapura may not understand are so very close to her heart. I am used to living in a small world that gives me more than I need. I feel Pataliputra's excitement as unpleasant. I love nature, Kausambi. When disturbing thoughts beset me, I ride out into the Doab with my guard and instantly the harmony in my soul returns.'

Ashoka is touched by the simple honesty of this Rani and even more so when they arrive in Kausambi. The inhabitants are thrilled and joyous now that the Maharani is returning to their city. The veneration for their Maharajah fuses with their unconcealed love for her.

'I am glad to see that the people love you so much, my jungle-rani.'

'I follow the good example of my Lord and offer gifts where I think it can empower the Dharma and it is gratifying to know that many of the rich follow my example and act in your spirit.'

'You understand the sara of my endeavours and practise it.'

'The honour is not for me, lord, but goes to you yourself.'

Karuvaki is delighted with the beautiful new palace. In the thinned-out forest, lotus ponds have been built with hewn stones. Exotic flowering shrubs have been arranged in such a way that when they are viewed from the palace during Sharad and Vesanta, they look like one luscious blooming garden, descending downward to the sacred river.

The new palace, constructed completely with hewn stones, contains a choice of many rooms and an audience hall of polished granite. The glossy green walls are like mirrors. Between the slim pillars, embellished with gold leaf and flower patterns, is a frieze of red sandstone carved in light relief on which some jatakas of the Buddha are depicted in finely made roundels with a wreath of lotus motifs. In a matt white marble hall for the Emperor, with slim white pillars, embellished with white gold, is a throne of black, polished stone. A wealth of carpets, from Bactria, Syria and Iran, are placed over the seats and in niches. Big copper lamps and bowls of gemstones give the large room a distinguished and noble intimacy.

Karuvaki is full of admiration, also for the Maharajah who had the palace so carefully arranged for her. He guides her through the gate leading to the town along a mango grove next to the palace yard, to an open space. There, one of his great pillars from the workshops of Chuny is erected. Karuvaki halts, filled with amazement.

‘It is the first time that I see one of these pillars, Lord.’ She walks around it, looks at the amazing shaft which is polished like fine metal, looks up at the Syrian capital and the crowning of lions. Her hand, caressing, slid over the shiny surface.

‘Read what is written here, my Rani.’

‘The mahamatras of all places are ordered the following by his Sacred Majesty: Whatever gifts are donated here by the Second Rani, be it mango groves or gardens or alms-houses or otherwise, have to be considered as gifts from this Rani. This is a request of the Second Rani, the mother of Tivara, Karuvaki’.⁹

Karuvaki kneels before her beloved Maharajah.

‘I am deeply touched by your kindness, Lord.’

‘Does it flatter your vanity?’

‘Nobody believes that it is out of vanity that the great Maharajah has inscribed his lipis everywhere in indestructible rocks, because his whole life is in harmony with what he intends: the welfare and happiness of his people. It makes me feel happy that my beloved Lord has written down this lipi.’

‘Fortunately you understand it this way, my Karuvaki.’

Ashoka remains in Kausambi until Kunala’s army, according to the messengers, reached the northern Doab at Kanyakyubia. Then the Emperor, accompanied by a cavalry troop, follows the King’s Road to Krishnapura, where the army will cross the Jamuna. By the time he arrives they have already been, for some days, crossing over to the other side on rafts and boats. Kunala and Kanchanamala journey together with Ashoka to Mathura where they are welcomed with great pomp by Raja Saka.

Ashoka remembers in the smallest detail his experiences in this city which has undergone great changes since choosing the side of the Buddha. In its surroundings several stupas have been erected and massive monasteries have been founded in the forested environment. Close to the

Jamuna, where once upon a time the ashes of Princess Madri were entrusted to the river, stands the Madri-monastery, abundantly gifted by Ashoka. Raja Saka is a diligent upasaka of the Sangha. And yet, for the Maharajah it is as if all those people are still alive, who once played a role in the drama of the poor Princess who fell victim to the clash of powers between men. Whatever for? Demons, answers Kunala. But were they not rather the victims of the winds of change? And are there not always innocent victims, when the storm of times blows away the decaying vapours of the swamps of old traditions? With his arm he slaps away all that makes him feel sad. The loveliest that he found in Mathura snatched away by a fanatical priest! Is there danger for Kunala as well?

Just outside the gate of Mathura stands an ox-cart, heavily dust-covered, obviously waiting for the procession of the high visitors to pass. From the vehicle a familiar face peeps at the Maharajah. In spite of his iron-clad memory he finds it difficult to identify who it is. It is only when he had gone through the gate and enthusiastic cheers of 'Hail to the Maharajah!' resounds, that his memory comes to his help again: it is the oldest student of Santanu! Katcha! Immediately he orders for the ox-cart to be stopped in front of the gate and to lead its passengers before him. Katcha unnerves him.

After the hearty welcome at the court of Raja Saka, he is informed that the prisoners are waiting. Swift in all his decisions and actions, Ashoka proceeds to the court-hall. The purohita of the court joins him and Kunala at the Law-court,

'What brings you again on the path of the Yuvaraja, Katchayana?'

'I travel to Taxila.'

Ashoka frowns. 'You know who you have before you, Katcha!'

'I travel to Taxila, noble Maharajah.'

'So, you have just returned from Taxila. Why?'

Katcha looks slyly around. 'I no longer liked Taxila, noble Maharajah.'

'And yet you are now returning to Taxila?'

'I regretted that I had broken off my studies, noble Maharajah.'

'Now, when the army is going there to suppress a revolt?'

Katcha keeps silent.

'The noble Yuvaraja still has some questions for you.'

Kunala asks, 'Why did Katcha leave Tirha so suddenly?'

‘Because I wanted to go to Taxila for further studies.’

‘To whom do you speak, Katchayana!’ the agitated Maharajah calls out.

‘... high Yuvaraja.’

‘So soon before your *samavarthana*¹⁰?’

‘I did not feel safe there any more, high Yuvaraja.’

‘After your meetings with Kodini and Kawi?...’

‘You keep silent, Brahmin. You try to avoid this question, too. Answer! Or, we will have to compel you!’ Ashoka interrogates sharply.

Once again it is Kunala’s turn. ‘You caused the elephant-attack. Why that crime?’

‘They had stolen my bride from me!’ Katcha calls out in unbridled temper.

‘Whom do you call your bride? The one you choose yourself or the one who is promised to you by her father?’

Katcha remains silent.

‘You do not answer after your second lie!’ Ashoka calls out fiercely.

‘Has a brahmacharin ever been allowed a bride in his guru’s house?’ Kunala continues.

‘No, the law of Manu forbids that, high Yuvaraja.’

‘Well, what reasonableness then underlies your crime, which caused the complete destruction of Tirha? Moreover, Santanu had made clear to you that you could never count on his permission. So, it was a crime of revenge. That is why you fled!’

‘Once again,’ Ashoka takes up the questioning. ‘Why are you going to Taxila?’

Katcha, still silent, casts a haughty look at Kunala.

‘Answer or I will have to force you to answer!’

‘I wanted to live where Kancha lives,’ he says stubbornly.

‘You mean where the Yuvaraja lives!’

‘Yes, noble Maharajah.’

‘So, I understand that you are again intent on revenge.’

When Katcha once again chooses not to answer, Ashoka roars at him:

‘Your keeping silent, I consider to be an acknowledgement!’

‘You have the might to do so, noble Maharajah.’

‘No, the manas! You will return to Pataliputra and for the time being you will not leave the city. At the first breach of these rules you will be sent to the mines at the Gandaki. The Mauryas no longer tolerate mad sacrificial priests on their paths!’

The Maharajah summons some servants and orders them to have a cavalry brigade immediately lead the ox-cart and the prisoners back to the capital. He also sends an order to Maskarin, that Katchayana is not to be permitted to leave the city and shall be placed under strict guarding.

‘Is the young Brahmin a danger, my Father? The days of Devaka, Sunasepha and Shakuni are over.’

‘For this type of priests there exists no time, no crime, and no compassion. When they see an opportunity, they seize it, and then they feel every action is allowed to them! If not for themselves then for their accomplices ...’

‘Is it not ridiculous that such a young priest could accomplish anything against me and my father?’

‘They do not work with honest weapons. Their cleverness is directed to secret attacks, poison, snakes, and assassination. I was armed against this; I always carried five chakras with me, sharp and unerring. And I had Revata. I was brought up as a warrior, you as a Raja. That is why I am never sure whether you are capable of coping with these errants from their doctrine. When I know that you can take good care of your life and your safety, in the interests of our people, I would be at ease.’

‘You can trust me, my Father. Know that for me my obeisance to you rises above all else.’



SAVITRI

Once again the most notable residents of Mathura take a stroll in the park of the palace. Women on whose arms and ankles, bracelets and anklets softly tinkle to the movement of their arms or to the rhythm of their gait. Gossamer muslin cloaks in bright colours embroidered with flower-motifs and gemstones, sway to the soft waves of the wind. Ashoka-blossoms and kimsukis, jasmine and kovidara-blossoms, bandhujivas and lovely water-lilies, adorn breasts and hips or glisten in dark hair. Snow-stones shine and glitter in the silk headscarves of the Princes and the sons of the wealthy merchants. And as if the park would fail in spreading its soft scents, servants sprinkle pathways with rose-water of Baghdad and sandal powder of the Deccan.

Ashoka is walking with the Raja of Mathura through the park. The guests bow deeply. A few amongst the older still remember the young Prince, who had long ago passed by Mathura on his way to Taxila, and the death of Madri; how Ashoka had announced the betrothal of Prince Kala and Madri at a great celebration in the court. Since then, legend after legend had swept through the kingdom in which the 'incarnation of Shiva' played the leading role. The Maharajah directs his steps towards the hill, just as he had then. At its foot the Rani of Mathura stands. By her hand she has a little

girl, maybe five years of age. Ashoka suddenly walks up to her and exclaims, 'Madri!'

The little girl is a little disconcerted. The Rani asks, 'Did Your Gracious Majesty know that my daughter was called Madri?'

'No, but she is the exact image of Raja Saka's sister, Madri.'

'So they say, noble Maharajah,' answers the Rani.

'Will Madri accompany me to the top of the hill?'

She looks up at her mother, who nods. Then she takes Ashoka's hand and walks along.

'Have you been on this hill before?' she asks.

'Yes, once.'

'With whom?'

'With ... Madri.'

'With me?' she asks in disbelief.

'No, with a different Madri.'

'Is she a big girl?'

'Yes, she was big and sweet.'

'How big was she?'

'So big!'

And Saka and the Rani see how the Maharajah lifts the little girl, hoisting her high above him. Little Madri laughs. Ashoka keeps her in his arms. When they reach the top, he says:

'Look over there, to the Doab. There, in the jungle, are tigers and dangerous animals.'

'Will they harm us?'

'They are far off. Look there, the army of the Yuvaraja!'

'So many elephants! Will they harm us, too?'

'No, they are sweet animals. And the horses, too.'

'You are sweet, too.' She puts her arms around his neck and gives him a kiss. He sets her down, deeply touched because of the memory of the other Madri.

The Rani remarks, 'You have become friends, noble Maharajah.'

'And she touches my heart because here I once misunderstood a lovely young girl. It gives me a feeling of regret, never to be erased, of un-righteously misjudging a good human being.'

I did my best to repair the mistake ... Devaka put an end to that’.

They walk back. For the third hour of the afternoon, Raja Saka has ordered a distinguished theatre troupe to give a performance for the high guests.

Suryadatta’s actors are chosen with care by him, artists with imagination who know the languages of the theatre well, and who can rightly feel the atmosphere of the theme. They always have to promote the progress of the next line of their co-actors with accurate promptings. Suryadatta reads aloud at the rehearsals a part of the play, whether it is a drama or a legend and the actors create the dialogues themselves. That is their craft. If someone wishes to be taken on as an actor, Suryadatta tells him: ‘Show me what you are able to, do not play the role of Asvapati. You are Asvapati, imagine yourself within his inner-most being, you are his incarnation; forget your own life. What you say has to be genuine and true, vital to your incarnation; it has to express your inner self in true words. The nakata¹ has to grow like a plant out of a seed.’

Suryadatta himself is a great artist. The play of today has been discussed and the players thoroughly trained by him because he has never before played for such high company: the sacred Maharajah himself and his son, heir to the throne.

When all the guests have taken their seats, the priest appears, to praise Shiva: they still vaguely feel as though Ashoka is an incarnation of that mighty godhead:

THE PRIEST

May Shiva who catches the waters of the heavenly Ganga within the tresses on his three-eyed head and impel them on along the fair firmament of his celestial abode in the Himalayas, down to the sacred banks of the Ganga, passing by the devout city of Mathura where the mightiest rulers of the world have united.

May Shiva who has amplified his vigorous dance of life and death all over space, the life which pulses in the spirit of the holy Maharajah and his son, the Yuvaraja, so that their empire of righteousness and prosperity will flourish forever;

May Shiva who is with us at this very moment, be gracious to the actors and manifest his inner glory through them, so that all who are assembled here will be strengthened by his exalted being;

May Shiva whom we approach with awe, grant all of us the utmost happiness!

Suryadatta appears on the stage.

Suryadatta:

Enough! Stop! Marisha, come soon!

Marisha:

Here I am, sir!

Suryadatta:

I suggest we enact a play that everyone has heard about, a Trotaka² of the king's daughter Savitri, given to King Asvapati by the Goddess Savitri, after whom she is named.

Marisha:

Sir, will we be able to impersonate a woman who is as exalted as Princess Savitri, a man as holy as Narada, a king as mighty as Asvapati, and one as holy as the deposed king, Dyumatsena, in their own surroundings?

Suryadatta:

I have chosen the best of actors of the country and I long for them to display their art to the noblest kings of the world, who to India's unbounded, encompassing good fortune, rule over this land. May they listen with kindness and growing interest to the words which are so full of inner strength that they create divine chances!

Marisha:

One more thing, sir, Savitri is a Brahminical tale. Would it not be better to enact a lofty play about the most Exalted, Realised Buddha, or one of his beautiful jatakas? Not just thousands but millions became followers of the sect of the Tathagata.

Suryadatta:

Can something beautiful forfeit its beauty because of its origin or when someone who looks at it is from a different sect?

Beauty is not of maya but is linked with the eternal. Put your whole being into the play so that it comes alive. You are the son of Dyumatsena, Satyavant the truthful one.

Marisha:

Do I hear people talk, sir?

Suryadatta:

It is the childless King Asvapati and the goddess Savitri who appeared to him from out of the sacred fire.

Marisha:

Did the poor king not beget children?

Suryadatta:

Unfortunately, no, if I may say 'unfortunate', when one has such a divine patroness.

Marisha:

Maybe, Asvapati insulted the gods. Or, has he gravely sinned in a former life?

Suryadatta:

He, rich in virtues, is the king of Madra, who devotedly discharges his royal duties. He is merciful and full of piety, truthful, master of the senses, ready to make sacrifices and is deeply loved by his people. But Asvapati is childless and not in his youth anymore. He took upon himself great penance for begetting children, making sacrifices to goddess Savitri, the daughter of Surya, a thousand-fold times. So, he lived for eighteen years a life of austerity to please Savriti. Then one day she turns on him her eyes of mercy. Rising out of the sacred fire she appeared before him.

PROLOGUE

*Now the palm-frond screen profusely decorated with flowers opens.
Suryadatta has curtained the stage soberly and plainly with soft-
coloured cloths,
So that it will not fetter fantasy in its flight;
A seat and a few cushions, are all that may distract attention.
On the seat sits Asvapati;
He stands up and curtsies slowly to the Goddess Savitri and kisses
Her heavenly-blue, cloudlike cloth.*

Goddess Savitri:

Grace shall be yours, Asvapati, King of Madra, I will grant you a boon. You have been so unrelenting in your worshipping of me. Choose whatever you want but do not choose what is unjust or goes against your duties.

Asvapati:

O, Radiant Goddess, bestow on me sons who will perpetuate my lineage. Is not perpetuation of one's blood the sacred duty of every Arya?

Goddess Savitri:

By Brahma's grace there will be born a child to you, not a son but a girl of great beauty and virtue. Do not ask for more, let this blessing be enough.

*The king, overjoyed, has the sacred rituals performed. Savitri
ascends again to heaven, the screen silently closes.
Suryadatta speaks now to Marisha.*

Suryadatta:

A year later, preceded by all the signs of good fortune, a daughter is born just as it was foretold.

Since it was Goddess Savitri who had bestowed it, he called the child Savitri.

And this daughter grew to be a girl of heavenly beauty:
Small of waist, broad in the hips, like a golden statue
Of the Goddess Sri³ herself: A celestial devi ...

But no man sought the lotus-eyed to become his wife.
Dazzled by her divine being, men were daunted.
In a short while, she, with anointed hair, will bring flower-offerings to the gods,
And what remains of the flowers she will offer to the king.
She kisses her father's feet and happily offers him her beautiful flowers.
The king looks at the beautiful girl full of grace and goodness,
But no man has offered yet to marry his daughter and he is deeply saddened.

Marisha:

I will go, sir, to prepare myself for this play of a Princess of such beauty. It is not just Bharata⁴ who created her. She, the beautiful Savitri, Asvarpati's daughter, is *Mahabharata's* greatest jewel.

Now the strains of the veena, turti and the ravanastha whisper softly, sounding like the feet of nymphs dancing on echoing bridges that arch over the Ganga of heaven in the celestial world. The lovely tender melody laments in its plaintive vibration, and swells into a youthful glow, as if the goddess can barely contain the love within her bosom and cajoles and tantalises, and teases and laughs and enlivens life with her impudence.

Suryadatta:

The king speaks!

The screen fades away

I

Asvapati:

Now that you are grown up and are mature, it is time to marry, my child, but no one has come to claim your hand. So, proceed on your own and choose the spouse you feel is worthy. I know you will choose well.

The sacred books of the Brahmins teach that the father who does not give his daughter a good husband in time, a husband who loves his wife, is

to be reproached, just as a son would be if he did not take care of his mother after his father's death.

Therefore, go forth and look for a spouse as I have told you to, so that the wrath of the gods will not strike me down. I will take care about who will accompany you on your journey and be your counsellors ...

The beautiful young maiden, blushing sweetly, bows low before her father.

The King calls in the wisest of the counsellors and tells them what he desires.

Savitri starts dressing up for the journey. The golden chariot approaches.

...Bells ring, small chimes tinkle while the talan⁵ rings.

A beautiful conversation unfolds, not learned but developing from the

Fullness of their art, in an ambience so true that

The audience sees Savitri, the king and the counsellors as if they are real.

The counsellors pay heed and hear how conflicting it is, in the mind of the king,

The conflict between the love for his child and the strong desire for offspring.

This is expressed in the play, in its tone and the choice of words.

Savitri now comes back, arrayed for a journey. Her youth, her spirit is radiant,

Which all behold with admiration.

Pearls are shining in her dark hair. A jasmine-white dress of the finest of muslin swells under her pink cloak,

Wrapped carefully on her by a servant. And even as the karna⁶ trills its music when the caravan sets off,

The richly decorated chariot and its strong guard proceeds to the forest.

The sound of the bells and the beat of the talan fade away in the dense jungle.

Soundlessly, the curtain is closed.

II

When it unfurls again,

Suryadatta:

For many months now King Asvapati is waiting!

Asvapati is seated, pondering and in distress, for Savitri has not returned yet from her journey.

Asvapati:

Has she encountered danger in the forest? Or, has the journey failed? Why is it that she is tarrying?

Then, unannounced, the Muni Narada⁷, the celebrated sage, the adviser of the gods, comes visiting the palace. He greets Asvapati. The king rises reverently and welcomes the rishi warmly. After refreshing himself and enjoying a simple meal, Narada seats himself before Asvapati. At that very moment Savitri returns home in her golden chariot, back from her far-away journey. With loving reverence, she greets first the rishi, then her father.

Narada:

On whatever travels did the daughter of the pious ruler go? Whence does she come that her countenance is so joyful and her cheeks are blooming thus? But for what reason has the king not yet bestowed a spouse?

Asvapati:

That is the reason why my unrest grew and why she in the end went forth on this journey to seek a spouse. And now, she comes back today. So listen to her, O, Rishi, and hear about the one whom she has chosen by herself to be her spouse.

Narada looks at her, full of admiration. The beautiful girl laughs, smiling up at him.

Narada:

Well then, do speak, you noble daughter of a king who discovered so late your spouse.

Savitri:

I wandered about from place to place, from forest to forest, through the whole world where sons of kings live. I have paid reverence as taught by my father, to the ever-meritorious elderly. I offered alms and goods to the poor and to the Brahmins. But nowhere did I find the one for whom my heart was searching. In the end I neared a hermitage in the forest of Salwe. And there lived a king, a noble Kshatriya, a man of diligence. Dyumatsena is his name. When he grew old he went blind. His son was still a little stripling when the blind king was overthrown by an old foe and the noble family was driven out from their land. With his wife and child he then sought refuge in the forest of Salwe and there they dwelt. His son, born in a city and raised in this forest, is named Satyavant. It is he who I have chosen as the only one who pleases me. If my father consents, it is him I wish to be my spouse.

Narada:

Forgive me as I listen in alarm, my King, but a great imprudence has been committed by Savitri, for without knowing more she has chosen poor Satyavant. His father utters only the truth, so too his mother, that is why he is called Satyavant.

Asvapati:

But holy Narada, is he not noble, wise and patient? Is he in want of valour, this son of Dyumatsena from the forest of Salwe?

Narada:

He is as noble as the sun, as wise as Brihaspati, as courageous as Indra himself and has the patience of the earth.

Asvapati:

And is he generous and pious and speaks also the truth, this Satyavant?

Is he noble of demeanour, friendly in his countenance?

Narada:

Generous is he, like King Rantideva⁸, loyal and pious like Sivi, son of Usinar, and as noble is he as Yayati⁹, the son of Nahushna.

To look at he is pleasing like Soma, beautiful like the Ashwins, whose rays scatter ahead of Surya in the early morning. So thus is Dyumatsena's son.

Asvapati:

You show me Satyavant, adorned with all these beautiful virtues; now tell us what his failings are and what there is to disapprove.

Asvapati:

He has but one failing, O, King, the noble virtuous Satyavant, which nothing can change.

That one failing of Satyavant is that in a year from this day of today, the young Prince will have to lose his precious life.

Savitri:

Who has been listening, tense and pale, reflects and then speaks:

A legacy is divided but once,
Only once is the bride given away by her father.
Only once is a gift given and that is thrice as good.
Whether he lives long or fleeting, is poor or rich in virtue,
My husband I have chosen once, and no other will I choose.
Once the heart has decided and the word spoken,
The deed will be done as a matter of course; that is why I
follow my heart.

Narada:

How resolute she is, O, King, your beautiful daughter Savitri! By nothing or by no one will she be deterred from her duty. And since no other man has Satyavant's virtues, it may be wise for you to give him to your daughter.

Asvapati:

I shall do as you say, for you are my master, Exalted One.

Narada:

Then may the wedding of Savitri be without impediments! I have to go now; be abundantly blessed by the gods, every one of you!

Narada now ascends swiftly to heaven. The palm frond screen covers the stage again.

Suryadatta:

Asvapati now begins preparing with thoroughness for the wedding feast. And when the day is proper and good omens seen, he departs, together with the priests and other Brahmins to the sacrificial forest, where Dyumatsena dwells. He approaches on foot the saintly old blind king, silently sitting under a sal-tree, on a seat of kusha-grass. First he greets Dyumatsena reverentially; then, softening his voice, he calls out the names of all the guests.

The blind one offers the travellers a welcome present and a seat.

III

The screen of flowers vanishes. They now have built a gentle stage depicting a forest, where the love scene is played that now begins.

Dyumatsena:

Noble friends, what leads you into the forest where live only hermits?

Asvapati:

The maiden here, O, Holy One, is my only child, Savitri. Accept her from me, O, Pious One, as the wife-to-be of Satyavant.

Dyumatsena:

We are the dispossessed; we live here in the forest,

We practise piety with discipline and penance. How will this virgin, only knowing palaces, bear the burden of our silent home?

Asvapati:

The happiness or ill-fortune of possessions and loss are sufficiently reflected upon by my daughter and me. So, this is why I do not heed the words you speak.

We come to you already resolved, O, King. In friendship do I bow before you, do not kill my hope and turn down the wish which brings me here.

We are equal of birth and rank, you and me. So, in friendliness do accept her as a spouse for Satyavant.

Dyumatsena:

Often I have wished to be related to you, O, King;
Yet, there was one hindrance; I am deprived of my kingdom.
So, may the old wish be fulfilled, be welcome here...

The two noble kings summon all the sages from their hermitage, and then the marriage and the wedding feast takes place according to traditions.

Asvapati bestows a befitting dowry on his daughter and joyfully returns to his own city. And so Satyavant, the noble virtuous one, is with his wife, and she with her desired one, both intensely happy. After her father's departure, she casts off every ornament, and puts on bark cloth from a birch tree and a red cloak.

Charming everyone through her friendliness and courtesy, by her virtues and her discipline, she is loved by everyone. The screen parts.

Suryadatta:

Savitri nurses always with great care the mother of Satyavant. Through her serenity and submissiveness, she respects his father, as it should be.

And her husband she delights with her tenderness, charm and spirit.

So, they live happily in the woods for some time. Yet, in heart she always carries, in silence, the heavy weight of the fear of Narada's words and without pause comes closer the day when Satyavant has to die.

IV

When the flowery screens part for the fourth part, you see the hermitage.

Savitri anxiously counts the days ... There are only four left.

She announces that she once made a promise to the gods: she would not eat nor drink and would stand motionless for three days. Concerned, trying to soothe Savitri, Dyumatsena speaks:

Dyumatsena:

O, King's-daughter, what you wish to embark on is much too hard. To stand motionless for three nights, O, dear one, that is a hard task!

Savitri:

Honoured Father, worry not, I wish to fulfil this vow. On purpose do I undertake this for the fulfilment of a wish.

Thus does she speak to the noble Dyumatsena who now remains silent. And Savitri stands still for three nights.

All other hermits look with speechless amazement and admiration at the woman. Nothing can daunt Savitri from her noble task. When the curtain of palms silently closes, the penance is going on.

Suryadatta:

The last day she spends in great anxiety and great fear, thinking all the time, tomorrow is the day that my husband has to die!

V

When the screen vanishes and dawn breaks, she sighs.

Savitri:

This is the day!

She flings offerings into the fire, and has already performed her morning duties, before Surya conjures up his radiant light. Then she hurries on to Dyumatsena and his wife, along the way greeting reverently all other pious hermits, greeting all deferentially with folded hands.

The other inmates offer her their morning greetings with blessings thus:

THE FOREST DWELLERS

‘May you never have to undergo the fate of a widow!’

Savitri:

May it be so! May it be so!

Poor Savitri replies again and again, eager to hear this pious blessing, even as she is thinking with growing fear of the hour and the moment prophesied by Narada. However, Satyavant’s father speaks:

Dyumatsena:

You have fulfilled your vow faithfully the way you desired.

So, now it is time for you to eat. So, do not wait to partake some food.

Savitri:

My vow does not permit me to partake food before Surya goes down.

Savitri is still speaking, when Satyavant enters with an axe to go into the forest. Savitri calls to him:

Savitri:

Don’t go alone! Let me accompany you into the jungle for I cannot live without you now!

Satyavant:

You have never been into the woods, the path leading into it is rough, O, dear one, and by your fast, you are weakened now! How will you be able to go along?

Savitri:

The fast did not enfeeble me, my faithful one; I want to be with you today!

Satyavant:

If you are able to accompany me, I would love to allow you to follow your desire. But first ask my parents so they will not blame me.

Savitri(to the parents):

Satyavant, my husband, goes to the forest to chop wood. To keep away from him today feels hard for me and to stop him is not advisable because he is getting wood for the great sacrifice. Therefore, if you allow me, dear parents, I would love to go with him today. For a full year, I have not left the hermitage. Now, I verily wish to see the forest, its flowery splendour and hear the trilling of birds.

Dyumatsena:

Ever since you have been gifted by your father to us as a daughter, Savitri,
As much as I know, with a request you never sought us.
That is why my daughter will be allowed that which she desires now.
Though be careful, Savitri, lose not your way.

After parting from the parents, Savitri now walks into the jungle with her spouse, smiling, though with a heart full of suffering. As they depart, the noble Satyavant softly speaks to her:

Satyavant:

Behold, my lovely one, how lovely and wonderful the forest is, look at the peacocks there, the rivulets from the brook and the floral beauties.

*Walking behind her spouse, she, however, sees only him everywhere,
Thinking of the hour, grief-filled, when her spouse shall die.
The screen draws closed on the fifth part.*

VI

When it opens again, Satyavant has filled his basket with fruit and starts cutting the wood; sweat drips from his pores. Then he feels unwell, goes to his wife, and says:

Satyavant:

My work tires me, my head is wracked as though it is being hammered, my beloved; that is why I will lie down on the moss for a while.

Instantly Savitri approaches near and seats herself on the ground, she carefully nestles the head of her spouse on her lap. Sitting thus she ponders:

Savitri:

This is the dreaded hour I fear, for according to Narada's prophecy, my spouse will die.

At that very moment there appears a shining figure, bright, red of eyes, dark of skin and, in his hand he carries a noose.

He places himself quietly beside Satyavant, and looks intently down upon him.

Even as she sees him, softly does she ease the head of Satyavant down onto the moss, then stands up and with folded hands and trembling heart, speaks thus:

Savitri:

I recognise you as a mighty god for you do not look like a human being,

O, Godly Prince, I beg you, who are you and what are you looking for here?

Yama:

O, Savitri, beauteous one, so true are you to your spouse and so rich in virtues, that is why I answer you: I am Death.

Savitri:

They say that usually your harbingers come to snatch away the life of men, Lord! How does it happen, Lord of the Blessed Ones, that you yourself appear here?

Yama:

Satyavant is pious, an ocean of virtues, which is why my harbingers do not come to take him, but I myself appear.

Speaking thus, the god pulls at the noose, softly easing life out of the body of Satyavant. And Satyavant goes pale and is still.

And Yama, with the spirit of Satyavant in his noose then sets off southward ...

Followed by a voiceless, faithful Savitri, lost in her pain.

The screen closes. Then opens.

A soft, wondrous yet mournful music follows them on their journey through the woods.

A viola sings a tender, keening melody accompanied by a veena and a drum as though they weep, gasp, sob ...

Moved, the audience keeps silent. It is as though the very trees are listening. Their leaves are silently hanging down, only those of the pipalas move, trembling on still-frozen branches. The kokila sings from afar. Ashoka looks stealthily at Kunala, who is sitting motionless and does not seem to share his father's unrest.

VII

When the screens opens on the seventh part, Yama and Savitri make their difficult way through the woods that presents obstacles.

Yama:

Turn back and return, Savitri, you now have to perform the rituals of death. For a long time you have come along with your spouse, go back now.

Savitri:

Wherever you lead my spouse, wherever you go, I have to go along with him, it is my duty. Do not forbid me from going along with him, for I have done penance, honoured the parents, loved my spouse and kept my promise ... so you may be merciful.

They say that, the one you walk together the seven sacred steps with, is already your friend;

It is not incautious to live in the woods
Exercising virtues, for the sages name virtue
Their treasure and home.
For the good ones therefore, virtue comes first.
By virtue, they thus believe,
We have arrived at last on the final path of salvation.
And we need not look for a second or a third:

For the good ones therefore virtue comes first.

Yama:

Savitri, pure one, enticing is your beautiful poem; I grant you mercy, choose whatever you wish, but not the life of Satyavant.

Savitri:

Let the blind father of my husband be given by your grace his sight.

Yama:

Done, faithful one! But now return, you are very weary already.

Savitri:

I, weary where is my spouse? I walk with you at a steady pace, however far you take him. Now hear further to my verse:

The good ones need meet each other but once,
They soon recognise each other as friends:
The friendship of the good ones is a great blessing,
That is why you should choose your home amongst them.

Yama:

Your beautiful words are refreshing to the heart and brightening to the mind!

I once more grant you a boon. Ask for what you crave but not the life of Satyavant.

Savitri:

Restore then his kingdom again to the father of my husband.

Yama:

Let it be so. Even this wish is granted. Hasten back now.

Savitri:

O, Yama, who can take mortals through force to such a place that they themselves do not long for? Yet, listen to these words:

To be mild and generous, to be benevolent in thoughts, words and deed,
From the bottom of their heart and to all beings, is for the good ones
their everlasting duty.

In this world it sometimes happens, out of favour or out of fear,
The good ones, however, love even the enemy who falls into their
hands.

Yama:

Like refreshing water for the thirsty, so sweet are your words for me!
One more boon do I grant you. But not the life of Satyavant.

Savitri:

My father has no son, Yama, grant him also descendants.

Yama:

Let it be so! But now return, already you have come a very long way.

Savitri:

Not far from me my husband reposes; much further goes my heart's desire.

Even while going, O, Visvavatin¹⁰, O, Lord of Justice¹¹, once more
listen to me:

One need not rely upon oneself if one can place trust upon the good
one.

That is why everyone should love the good ones.

It is easy to trust one, who is without iniquity and jealousy,

This is why trust can only rule, there where the good ones dwell.

Yama:

Never I heard such words, as you, O, Beautiful One, speak.

So, choose yourself a fourth boon. But not the life of Satyavant.

Savitri:

May many offspring be gifted to Satyavant and me.

Yama:

Descendants are given to you. But now, faithful one, do return!

Savitri:

The good ones are always labouring for others,
Not because they expect favours in return.
They labour because they see that as right:
To behave thus, is what the noble ones wish.
And the work of the good ones is not in vain,
The benefit of their acts not short-lived:
The good one leads by truth even the sun,
The good one supports by devotion, the earth.

Yama:

The longer you speak thus, so virtuous, so true, so kind-hearted, so lovable,
The more I adore you, O, pious one; ask therefore whatever you wish.

Savitri:

This time your grace is not lacking in bliss, as before.
Give to me the life of Satyavant, return to me the life of my spouse!
Return to me my life, return to me heaven, happiness and bliss!
I ask only what you have already granted to me,
For when you bestowed descendants to me and Satyavant,
You had thus already returned to me my spouse:
So, give to me the life of Satyavant.

Yama:

*Let it be so (Saying thus Visvavatin, unties the spirit of the noose.
And delighted, the Lord of Justice now says to Savitri)*

O, charming woman, here is your spouse. He is free, O, you, who impart happiness!
He will be healthy and strong and long will you be happy,
United with you, faithful and good, he will receive fame in this world.
The sons and sons of sons will please you, regally,

They will be famous by your name, for times still far ahead.
And you will meet brethren yet, like the gods, courageous one,
Named after your mother, Malavi, the Malavians.

*And so does the Lord of the Blessed Ones, the God of Justice speak,
and then disappears.*

*Savitri, the glorious one, returns with the life-spirit of Satyavant
To the woods where the paled body of Satyavant still lies on the
ground.*

*The screen draws closed; the veena, softly tinkling, dreams up a
dream.*

*The throb of the drums fades into the far-off space where Yama
went.*

VIII

*Time flies forward. Savitri nears the spot where Satyavant lies.
Her beloved's life-spirit sheltered tenderly in the pleats of her dress.
Now the flower-screen parts and Satyavant lies still in repose,
At the same spot where she left him earlier.
She seats herself and places the head of her beloved spouse on her
lap.
Into the dead body now returns life, and Satyavant
Awakens, opens wide the eyes and lovingly speaks to Savitri:*

Satyavant:

The night looks down on us through a thousand eyes,
It is hard to find the path; the forest is enveloped in darkness.
My parents will be worriedly anxious about us,
O, dear one, so let us return home speedily,
I'll find the way by the light of the torch.

*So saying Satyavant rises and with his axe cuts off a branch
Of a barren tree, kindles it as a torch, spreading light.
The basket with fruit they hang on a high branch,
To be retrieved, when they return the next day.*

*And with promptness they hasten homewards.
For protection does Satyavant retain the axe in his right hand,
And the left he gently keeps on Savitri's left shoulder.
She, with her left, holding aloft the torch, places the right one
Around Satyavant. So do the two walk through the dark woods,
In the night when animals seek prey.
The screen with the lovely scenery closes for the eighth time now.*

IX

*When the screen parts for the last time, one sees the hermitage of
Dyumatsena.
Worrying deeply for their son and daughter who have not returned
from the woods,
Along with his wife, sits Dyumatsena, by their side the pious band of
recluses
Who live around them, offering them solace.
With maxims and tales, they seek to conjure away the king's fear,
When suddenly they see how the king's sight returns;
With amazement he looks all around.
With clear eyes he sees everything. The Brahmins are awe-struck.
And then, at last, Satyavant enters the hermitage, together with
Savitri.
When they see this, the friends call out, rejoicing:*

A Brahmin:

*O, King, how gratified are we to see your happiness growing,
Returned home is your son and with him, Savitri.
And you again see – so your happiness counts as three.
And even further will expand, O, Noble One, your fortune.
When all are seated another Brahmin asks Satyavant:*

Second Brahmin:

*Why did you not return home earlier, Satyavant?
What forestalled you that you came back in the dark night?*

Your father, your mother and we were very worried.

Satyavant:

When I was cutting wood in the forest I became unwell and lay myself down.

And slept for a long time; this is the only reason why I am so late.

Third Brahmin:

So, is it merely coincidence then that Dyumatsena sees again? I really doubt

if you know all. Savitri, you, who radiates like the Goddess Savitri herself,

If you do not need to keep silent, tell us all that you know.

Savitri:

I need to hide nothing; so you, wise ones, will hear all that has taken place.

I once was foretold by Narada that Satyavant would

Die today; so I did not leave from his side this day.

And when he slept, Yama himself came, took away his life.

I, however, followed the god, praising him with truth.

Until he granted me five boons; I will tell them to you, sages:

To the father of Satyavant the god gave back his eyes and his kingdom.

To my father he then gave the sons that he so dearly wished;

To Satyavant he granted yet that I would give him sons,

And at last he returned to me the precious life of Satyavant.

I performed the vow, you considered too hard for me,

So that the life of Satyavant would be granted to me longer.

Now you all know how my suffering changed to joy.

Fourth Brahmin:

The house, heretofore sunk in grief, you have, Savitri,

Renewed to happiness and glory, by your faithfulness and piety.

Thanks to you, a part of Yama's promises are already fulfilled.

The other boons too, certainly will come true.
You, O, one, who gave these blessings, will forever be glorified.
And where the virtue of women will ever be famed, may Savitri be mentioned first ...

Ashoka has delightedly followed the beautiful play. The mood of the play touches him, as it is wholly in harmony with his views on life. Does it matter whether someone honours Buddha's doctrine or Brahmanism as long as an eye is kept on what rises above all sects and which actually is the essence of all sects.

'Well,' he asks Suryadatta, who approaches him together with Savitri. 'You enacted a wonderful play; are you a Brahmin that you chose this lovely legend?'

'I have taken the most beautiful there is of Brahmanism, Gracious Majesty, because all the sects originate from there. I knew of your sacred tolerance from the 12th rock-lipi.'

Ashoka nods. 'You are a great human being, Suryadatta. I think I understand now why you enacted the drama in Pali¹².'

'Lord, no one knows better than we, actors, how difficult it is in India, where each region is attached to its own language, to make oneself understood by the listeners. You have, noble Maharajah, made the link, you have bound them in a common language: Pali. And I think to act in your spirit when I perform my drama in that language, so that we can communicate the emotion that 'Savitri' can evoke, to everyone.'

'There is no nobler deed than working for the welfare of all. Your work comes out of that spirit, Suryadatta. I give you this as a memento of my appreciation for your work.' Ashoka takes a belt, beautifully embroidered with a choice of gemstones, and offers it to Suryadatta.

'May sons and sons' sons please you with valour, regally, and become renowned in the far future through your name, noble Maharajah.'

'And you, great artist, have played Savitri strikingly.'

'Lord, I do not play Savitri, I am Savitri's incarnation as long as I express her. That is the art of Suryadatta, noble Maharajah.'

'And yours! Receive this diadem from me. After all, you are a Yuvarani, now that Dyumatsena regained his kingdom.'

With a laugh, 'Savitri' shows her gratitude for the precious gift. Then one of Ashoka's pratidevakas approaches.

'Well, Kushtra?'

'Lord, the Agramahisi is seriously ill.'

'When did you leave the capital?' Ashoka asks, upset.

'Ten days ago, Lord. I have been riding over Ayodhya in great haste.'

Ashoka has everything prepared for the return journey. The farewell of Kunala and Kancha now worries him less.



DEMONS

After a few days the Maharajah arrives in Kausambi where he stays for the night. Karuvaki is deeply concerned about Asandhimitra's illness. 'At the mercy of Tishya Rakshita,' is her first thought.

'It would be a great misfortune for you, my Raja, to lose Asandhi.'

'It is her clear judgement that so often brought me back to myself whenever my unreasonableness would overwhelm me. I cannot bear the thought of losing her spiritual support and her keen *manas*, Karuvaki.'

'I recognise her keen and pious mind, Lord. She never thinks of herself. Brahma however gives the human being at least one fault to set him apart from the devas.'

'What do you mean, Karuvaki?'

'Her love makes her blind to demons.'

Ashoka raises his hand. 'Tishya has her faults like you and me. But Asandhi knows them. Tishya is like her child. The young Kshatriya filled her with compassion. Why do you begrudge Tishya that act of grace? Asandhi also tried to give her happiness. What have you done, my Karuvaki?'

'Nothing! You love your elephants, Lord, and your horses. And the animals reward you with their simple love and happiness. The peacocks in

the park call out their joy when they see you. But why do you not caress the cobra crossing your path?’

Ashoka makes an impatient gesture as Karuvaki goes on. ‘She is not happy, not cheerful, she only laughs to charm. She is not benevolent, not friendly, nor is she open-hearted and she knows no mercy!’

‘She loves Asandhi.’

‘Because from her alone can she expect protection.’

‘Because Asandhi is weak and needs support.’

‘That she gets as much as she wants. Tishya only wants to find favour with her.’

‘Karuvaki! You say harsh words about someone who is defenceless.’

‘Several times I have let her know what I think about her.’

‘I fear greatly that Asandhi will not survive this illness. Then you will have to return and make friends with Tishya.’

‘Lord, I do not wish to become the Agramahisi with Tishya by my side. Let me stay here in Kausambi, Lord. I will always be happy when you come to see me. I do not like imperial festivities, the pomp, assemblies of the parishad or the reception of the high envoys. I love my Lord and my child, the jungle and the Ganga.’

Ashoka thinks wistfully of Asandhi who does love all this, because she fulfills a vocation and wishes to stand by him. Karuvaki remained the child of the Mahavana.

In a swift journey of ten days, he travels to Pataliputra. Asandhi is seriously ill. Tishya, sobbing, receives him.

‘Come on, Tishya, you were so strong until now. I never saw tears. So enough. Do not alarm my Lord,’ the Agramahisi utters feebly.

Ashoka gives a sign to Tishya to leave. Then he takes Asandhi’s hands.

‘How serious is the truth, my beloved Rani?’

‘Very serious. I believe that my time has come. I do not feel that as unfair. I have been so spoiled by fate. I have, according to my father’s wish, been able to serve the country. But, most wonderful, was to be allowed to love and support my Lord. Your happiness was my greatest happiness. Tell me, my Lord, that I did not come to Pataliputra in vain!’ Tired, her head falls back on the white silken cushion.

‘When I tell you that you brought me happiness I express it so poorly, as though I called Surya a torch. I have wanted to bring happiness to the

millions of India. Only you gave to me, in whose blood runs warfare, with your purity, your humanity, your great simplicity, the power to work for that which is good. And you turned my heart towards that which is eternal. For that I will be always grateful to you, Asandhi, until my very last day.'

She softly presses his hands and a smile appears on her face, which has remained very beautiful over her years.

'I only made you aware, my Ashoka, of who and what you are. Be nice to Tishya!'

'Is she worthy of your love?'

'Does one know the value of each individual? She has something of the wildness, the untrammelled cravings of the jungle, of the cobra hidden under leaf mold, of the golden oriole in the top of the highest trees. I love her because she was like my own child who needed my support, my encouragement, comfort and trust. Her gratefulness and love was to me like amrita¹. I have rescued through her a human being who would otherwise have been lost.'

'Not everyone praises her.'

'Not everyone bears easily another man's happiness.'

'Except when that happiness is earned. The human heart is utmost sensitive to undeserved happiness.'

'Jealousy! One loves the one who by his nature is a good human being. But one cares for the one who has to fight a hard battle to become it, because care is both, compassion as well as willingness to support. Nobody knows, as I do, how much she has had to fight, abandoned by all gods and relations, and alone in your big city. For that she certainly needs my support, and soon yours.'

'I hope to fulfill your wish, my Asandhi.'

'Thank you, my great King. I would have loved so much to stay longer with you. But my health prevents me from meaning something to you still. I have to pass on to others what gave me so much joy. Joy passes by, death comes inevitably. It feels right for me to die now. The gods have been graceful to me in granting me such a blissful life by your side. If only I could start a new life with you, my beloved man!'

'We have capable physicians at the court, my Asandhi!'

A week later, Asandhi dies in the arms of Tishya while Ashoka is in conference with his ministers. The following day the death ceremonies are performed and the golden urn with the ashes of Asandhi are interred inside the great stupa that he had erected near Pataliputra. Suddenly, loneliness takes hold of the Maharajah, like the mist the valley of the Ganga, when the waters in the bed of the holy river withdraw in Ashvina².

In the evening, when Surya has descended behind the wide fertile fields with its grain, paddy and sugar cane, and the moon weaves her mild rays into the silence of nature, the Maharajah stands pondering at an elevated spot in the park of the stone wing, and his gaze wanders over the wide river in the West. Mist, mist! And the heavy burden of memories weighs unbearably on his mind. He does not want to yield to the 'Truth of suffering'. Not he! Because he does not want the path of the 'annihilation of suffering' as the Buddha taught in his first sermon in Kashi. Asandhi's death brings great loneliness to him. His thoughts, energy and willpower were almost wholly concentrated on the great task he had wished to take upon himself. And Asandhi had been so closely bound to that, that he had always felt that she was indispensable. She was the altar in the temple on which he laid down the offerings of his life's work, before it went to the deity, Life itself. Now it feels as if his task is over, because its very ground sunk down under Yama's force. She, like him, had one lofty goal: the happiness of India; like him, one conviction: that the human being has to strive for *Svarga*³, because it is in that endeavour that the ennobling of all life is enclosed. He saw the difficult road but she knew the right way to walk it! Asandhi had the self-renouncing love for the ones that he served. He wanted to be the father of his subjects but she was an infinitely loving mother for his peoples. Should he now hand over the governance to Kunala? He has the support of a wife who is like Asandhi! But Kunala has to gain experience in the West, learn how to rule a vast empire. Will he ever learn that? He, Ashoka, is tired. And he is not allowed to be so! Not yet! First, the happiness of his kingdom has to be secured through Kunala!

Tishya Rakshita? Is Karuvaki right in her judgement? Demonic? He smiles. There is one who perhaps could take Asandhi's place: Devi. Sweet as Asandhi, but without interest in what he feels as the most important or is it not that either? Maybe, without the inner strength that has to rise above the anthapura, the palace, Magadha. Devi feared Pataliputra, took refuge in the Buddha to strengthen her loving soul. For Asandhi, Pataliputra was a

high eagle's nest, from where her spirit could fly out over the wide land. And Devi? A Buddhist, busy with the construction of their love-stupa, the caitya of Mahindra, and the monastery of Sudeva. But does not Buddhism mean the will to bring well-being to others? Tishya has no feelings for Buddhism, Devi was a follower of the Buddha before he was himself! Where lies the answer to his questions! There is no Asandhi anymore to help him to find it! He cast a last look on the Ganga: mist, mist! Then he returns to his working chambers and orders for everything to be arranged for the following day at sunrise, for a trip on horseback to Bodh Gaya. He wants to visit the bodhi-tree under which the Buddha became enlightened. One of the first ones he lets in is the first servant of Tishya Rakshita, a confidante of Rohini.

‘Well Sinhi, do you have news?’

‘No, noble Maharajah, the Maharani is very distressed by the death of the Agramahisi, she hardly eats and usually sits in her chamber, staring into space.’

‘Did she not see anyone or did anyone come to see her?’

‘No, noble Maharajah, the Rani went to the stupa with Rita, to bring flowers. A few she brought herself to the room of the Agramahisi.’

‘Do you believe that her sadness is genuine?’

‘Yes, Lord. Or, she must be able to pretend with much skill. My mistress has forbidden anyone to enter the death chamber.’

‘It is good, Sinhi. Tomorrow, you will accompany the Maharani to Bodh Gaya.’

He immediately informs Tishya Rakshita that she has to prepare for a journey early in the morning to the Bodhi-tree in Gaya. They will go on elephant with horse-guards.

On the barely controlled countenance of the Maharani appears a wild flush of triumph. With a cry of victory she throws herself on the couch. But she gets alarmed herself by the sound of her voice and her control returns. Calmer, she starts to consider what kind of clothing she will take along: white, for the mourning of Asandhi! She wants to look cast down, no elation in the presence of her Lord! He shall not know how happy she feels, because she has made the first step. Fully aware of that she goes on to plan how she can move on. Time and again she let herself be carried away by her feelings. Now, particularly, she has to control herself with all her might. The

Maharajah shall understand that it is she, who is destined to be the highest woman in the empire! She wants to impress him by her calmness, her wisdom, her compassion, her ambition to follow the Buddha. So, no more jungle-manifestations, as Asandhimitra used to call them.

Early next morning, Tishya Rakshita appears at the place in front of the palace. Her sombre dress, totally in accordance with her pale, stern countenance, the somewhat languishing demeanour that she thinks is befitting the occasion—after all, is not the Maharajah taking her along because of her grieving—Ashoka looks on with pleasure. He senses something in her, something of the ways of Asandhi, who by her very nature was characterised by a dignified demeanour. Tishya has always studied Asandhi; in her ways of behaviour, in her ways of responding to the comments of the Maharajah, also her words, which had such a great impact on Ashoka. She is convinced that she, by her beauty and youth, can acquire that power as well, if her feelings of rebelliousness would not always again, like an unbridled tempest, rage inside her; then she forgets all that she intended. It is her pride of being a Kshatriya from the fort high up in the mountain in the mahavana. Now she wants to remain calm, dignified, like Asandhimitra. She knows that by her extraordinary beauty she scores over Karuvaki and Padmavati. She will speak and behave in as distinguished a manner as Asandhi!

When they are seated in the howda on the royal elephant, the Maharajah says:

‘I see that the journey is not unwelcome to the youngest Rani.’

Tishya frowns for a short moment upon hearing the word, ‘youngest’.

‘On the contrary, O, Maharajah, your orders are for me like the arrows of the Ashwins, which free the world of the night of an all-too depressing darkness.’

Evidently it is difficult for her to overcome her feelings of grief.

‘The many memories of Asandhi are for me like so many light-giving moments which strengthen me.’

One of her most charming smiles lights up upon him.

‘For me too, noble Maharajah, but Asandhi was my only support.’

‘Support for what?’

‘In the anthapura, against the others,’ she says, her temper sparking.

‘That is a testimony against you yourself, my Rani. There is no one in the anthapura who did not have a great love for Asandhi, because of her person!’

‘Because she was the highest, the Agramahisi,’ Tishya remarks sharply.

Ashoka absolutely wishes no dispute with the Rani. He wants to know who is right: Karuvaki or Asandhi.

‘Because she was wise and all-encompassing good. That is why she became the Agramahisi. Why did she love you so much?’

‘I think because, coming to Pataliputra as I did, with no protection, I attached myself to her, first from fear and later out of love.’

‘Yes, yes, the great compassion! Would you yourself offer protection too to a desolate orphan from the jungle?’

‘Maybe ... I do not know. I have never met one.’

‘With Asandhi everyone thought that was natural and in keeping with herself.’

‘She was a Brahmin lady and reflected much about what was good and what was not.’

‘One does not become good by thinking; thinking can stimulate the good in the human being. But one is either good or not good. When I choose my dharma-mahamatryas, Tishya, it does not matter to me whether they are Brahmins or Shudras. I need people who are so much superior to others in their composure, their views and sense of justice, so virtuous, that they already impress any sensitive human being by their entire personality. Asandhimitra was such a person! Anyone who met her once, knew that she stood above any other woman in truth, goodness and benevolence. Who do you think, Tishya, should succeed her?’

Tishya starts, taken by surprise by the question that has already been in her mind from the very first moment Asandhi was ill. If she could have guessed the deliberateness of Ashoka’s question, she might have lost her composure. But she knows how to recover. Utterly calm, she avoids the difficulty:

‘How could I advise you who you may have destined for such a high rank?’

‘You are like the Ganga-skipper who avoids the sandbank in the tide but straightaway sees another one before him. I do not ask your advice but your opinion. So, Devi, Padmavati. Karuvaki, Tishya Rakshita?’

Is the old Maharajah playing a game with her, the youngest Rani?

‘I know of no one who could replace Asandhimitra.’

‘That is a new sandbank you are sailing around, beautiful sailor. So, Devi.’

‘Devi! She does not know Pataliputra. And I do not know her.’

‘Padmavati. She is the mother of my dearest son.’

Tishya looks at him sideways. Does he know? No, then he would not have been talking so calmly about him to her!

‘Padmavati is sweet but does not understand the worries of the noble Maharajah.’

‘Very right. What about Karuvaki?’

A deep blush colours her sultry features. Ashoka believes a flush of fury!

‘Karuvaki lives in Kausambi. She feels herself to be my enemy. Perhaps you understand, noble Maharajah, that I would view her return to Pataliputra with great fear. I ...’

‘Continue with your frank opinion,’ Ashoka encourages her.

‘Maybe, I hate her, noble Maharajah.’

‘You are sharp and cautious. Karuvaki is sincere, simple and great as the jungle where she comes from.’

‘The jungle is cruel and cold.’

‘Cool, you mean. But often has a refreshing influence upon others!’

‘Lord, do not ask any further opinion about her. It would be a misfortune for me if she became Agramahisi.’

‘Because of her views or because of how you view her?’ Ashoka continues pitilessly.

‘Because of her opinions and words which never reveal any courtesy but only harshness.’

Ashoka smiles again. ‘So, you think the only one suitable is the fourth!’

Tishya laughs but it is with inner revolt.

‘You did not ask my opinion about her,’ she jokes.

‘Give it,’ the Maharajah says, sternly.

‘I do not have a definitive opinion about her; I know so much about her that it confuses me. Certainly the judgement of the noble Maharajah will be more correct. So, I suggest that you give your opinion of her.’

The sun has risen quite high above the horizon now. It strikes Ashoka that she is not in the least impressed by the beautiful sunrise above the River Son and the bright queen of heaven and earth, like Karuvaki had been once.

‘Not necessary, my Rani. I go to Bodh Gaya and will reflect under the sacred pipala where the Buddha attained enlightenment. This is in the interest of the entire India.’

‘Do you believe it was the sacred tree that helped enlighten the Buddha?’

‘I do not know the influence of animals and plants but I know that the human spirit requires a place in which it can expand. For that the Buddha chose a place under the bodhi-tree to come to clarity about the world. I want to attain that about my empire. Do I have to hand over India to Kunala? And if not, who will then be my Agramahisi?’ he provokes her.

‘Kunala is young and you are at the very height of your capabilities.’

‘Maybe, it is time for me to prepare myself for death like my grandfather did after twenty-five years of governing.’

‘India cannot miss your strength!’ Tishya calls out, anxiously. ‘Asandhi’s death makes you depressed. Think of your millions of subjects, Lord!’

‘The sacred pipala-tree,’ smiles Ashoka.

Tishya keeps silent. She feels the pipala-tree to be a danger. Kunala Maharajah, Kanchanamala the Agramahisi! And she the insignificant soon-forgotten Rani of Ashoka!

‘Were you not a viceroy for a long time, Lord? Kunala is only such a short time in Taxila!’

‘The pipala-tree, my Rani!’ he says, mockery lighting up in his eyes.

‘You, noble Maharajah, rule your entire people. You fulfil a lifetime’s work, you bring by your skills and your love, the empire to a flowering, and its subjects to the Dharma!’ Tishya speaks out with fervour. They are the words of Asandhimitra when she spoke about the holy Maharajah. Ashoka is surprised that Tishya is getting so excited, even finding her words so clearly and defending her self-interest.

‘Wait and see, beautiful Rani. The pipala creates a place for our thoughts so that they may bear the best of fruits.’

Ashoka knows every section of the road to Gaya, not only because he has visited the bo-tree several times but also by the walks in his youth, the climbing of the Barren Mountain, the homes of Jivaka and Sasarman. He tells the Rani about his trip with Kullika, the sacrifice of Rohini.

‘Is it not a pity, noble Maharajah, that faith in sacrifices has disappeared? It is as if the world has lost its foundation. One used to feel the gods always so near, when in need of help.’

‘No!’

Tishya, who happily welcomed the glibness of the Maharajah, now recoils, resentful and angry, at his short, taut answer.

‘All those begging monks at the houses in their ashen robes, with their shaven heads and the ever-present begging bowl clutched in their arms like a child! To be obedient and sweetly behaving! And all that to reserve a place in heaven or even to reach Nirvana! In the older world was more vigour, belief, life!’

‘Killing! Killing of men and animals! And for what reason! The great sacrifice of Rohini did not give her a son. When she and Sasarman were married, they got children without any sacrifices. Sacrifices for rain, against pestilence and other sicknesses are useless! Since we provide medicinal herbs for the whole of the country there are few serious illnesses anymore. Do you wish to retain the sacrifices merely for the sake of making sacrifices? Is it not better that my subjects practise benevolence and take care of mendicant monks with a little rice and fruits, which the sun is providing for them, rather than have the priests take away their cattle and treasures? Do not the animals which are sacrificed arouse your pity, my Rani?’

‘O, my Lord,’ Tishya replies, confused and alarmed. ‘For sure! But I was thinking of the sacred fires in the bright nights, the chanting of the priests, the contentment of the people who are offering the sacrifices. In contrast, our days are so ... dull, without the joy of something of such magic. The people just walk around in the pastures like cattle. No battles, no enemies! Thus, no more victories!’

‘There will be! The victory over that part within the human being which tries to make him a predator, a part which does not ascend to the beautiful and the good, but descends to selfishness, the tiger-nature. I work day and night to change people’s fundamental attitudes. I brought peace to the

empire. I bring justice to everyone. Does the victory of prosperity, the peace, the justice to my peoples, not mean anything? You wish to return the days of Chandragupta with the cruel whip for the slaves, and manslaughter, murder and injustice for all who are not Brahmins or Kshatriyas.'

'Lord, noble Maharajah, please stop! In thoughtless moments, I am always in the spell of the great house atop the mountain, where there was no distress, as Asandhi would say. Lord, please remain the Maharajah, spread your blessings over the great empire; do not withdraw from the place where no one can replace you yet! One who lives happily like me, so often forgets the fortune she enjoys. Only when it disappears that one feels what is lost. Asandhi was like you and she always knew how to make me aware of all you wrought for the beautiful and the good. Forgive me, Lord, that I forgot this for a moment. Please, remain the blessed, sacred Maharajah of India, Lord!'

The fear that she might have antagonised Ashoka brings an expression of dismay and horror to her face. A new insight gained?

'The sacred pipala-tree, my Rani,' he says once more.

On the night of the second day they arrive in Gaya. After the preparations for the night, the Maharajah leaves Tishya and proceeds to the sacred tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Soldiers guard the entrances. It is a serene night; nobody is allowed to disturb him in his contemplation. It is in this place that he wants to come to himself, overcome the loss of Asandhi, determine his future path, find the courage to decide; to strengthen himself after Asandhi's death from the source that nourished the life of the Buddha and which spread its blissful powers over India. And while the silent night glides away into eternity, the moon measures time by the dark-blue dome of stars, and the trees—as though in veneration—stand motionless around the lonely human being who tries to bring to serenity and harmony the waves on which tosses his heavily shaken soul, life in the darkness goes on. Yet, no rustling, no screeching or soft wing-beats can disturb the one who, with sharp manas, penetrates within his being, into his convictions, into what he will and can, into his wavering and irresistible strivings ...

By the time the Ashvins race ahead of Rohita along the heavenly dome and Ushas opens up the gate for their light-giving Lord, and Surya with his first rays regally rises up behind the jungle, Ashoka leaves quietly the

sacred place, calm and invigorated by strength-ripened thoughts. He bows low in deep submission to the glorious power:

*‘O, Sun Goddess,
Queen of heaven and earth...
You who give light,
You who give strength,
Holy, holy art thou!’*

He strides quietly along to the house of the Pradesika of Gaya. Tishya has awakened long before. Restlessness over what the Maharajah would decide about her, made her wake up early. On the lovely banks of the Nairanyana, in the beautiful surroundings of Uavela, she tries to recover her calm. She understands that only one way of behaviour can save her: Demonstrating friendliness, using her charming smiles, and to praise unconditionally whatever the Maharajah decides upon. She repeats this to herself many times so that it will be engraved in her mind like a lipi on the rocks. The Maharajah looks for her, approaches and greets her.

‘Lord, you did not sleep,’ she says, sounding worried.

‘I did not come here to sleep.’

‘But the journey will cause you too much fatigue.’

Ashoka smiles. ‘I have endured heavier journeys with less sleep, my Tishya. I am sorry I have to leave you in the care of Para. I will depart for Vidisha in a short while and you will return to Pataliputra.’

Tishya looks at him startled, at first speechless. Then fury overcomes her. A sharp answer hovers at the tip of her tongue. She wants to tell him that he leaves his young Rani to her own devices. She controls herself. She does not want to lose all influence on the Maharajah!

‘You are going to see Devi, Lord.’

‘Yes, I hope to take her along.’ He is keenly watching her.

‘So, your choice is made,’ she says, calmly, though her whole being is revolting.

‘Does it please you?’

Tishya laughs at him while regret sticks to her throat.

‘Devi is the best of the three.’

‘But not of the four.’

‘No ... Asandhi gave me her favours. That I do not expect from others.’

‘Why not?’

‘I have been a servant in the anthapura.’

‘Everyone knows that you are a free Kshatriya.’

‘I thank you, Lord,’ a happy smile shines towards him.

Ashoka is struck by her controlled and dignified demeanour. He knows from Asandhi that Tishya has an irascible short-tempered character: the mahavana! But also that she is able to control it when one supports her with wisdom.

After a refreshing bath and a good meal, Ashoka starts preparing for the long journey to Vidisha. The departure seems to sadden Tishya. Yet, she smiles happily at the Maharajah; this is her great charm and it will accompany the mighty Lord on his journey. It strikes him that she is able to keep herself so brave.

He has never allowed important decisions to be delayed in their execution. Now he thinks it is necessary to put to test the controversial character of his youngest, and by far the most beautiful Rani, in all ways. Then, along with his horse-troopers, he speeds to the road on which he has once, with all his exertion, rushed along to the capital.

Tishya Rakshita, along with Sinhi and Rita, wander around for a while in the surroundings of Uavela. She does not trust Sinhi, although she is attentive and ever ready to help her with a friendly smile. Rita is her confidante. They near the sacred Bo-tree, one like a thousand in her native land. She laughs: That the Maharajah undertakes such a long journey to meditate under that tree! If she would take his place there will her mind be able to think out stronger ways to get what she wants? What is the magic power of this tree? Is it because the Buddha once sat here? What has the old Maharajah invented this night? That it is Kunala’s time to succeed? That Devi—a diligent Buddhist, people say—is the most suitable Agramahisi? Must one therefore reflect for a whole night under a sacred tree? If that tree was not there would the Maharajah then continue to rule and choose her? He asked for her opinion. And yet, he goes to that Bo-tree! As if that tree is superior in manas than she! And he listens to what that tree prompts him to do. Slowly, a fierce rage wells up inside her. It has to die, that tree that stands in her way! So that it cannot bring disasters upon her. She walks

towards it, kicks against the trunk. The tree does not stir, as little as all the other ones, except the Ashoka-tree, it is said.

‘How does a tree die, Sinhi?’

‘I do not know, high Rani. Chop it or saw in two?’

‘Who dares to chop or saw in two a sacred tree! Can one kill a tree, like a human being?’

‘Would you like to kill this tree, high Rani?’ Sinhi asks, upset.

‘Not I! But someone else might.’

‘Why? This is a beautiful and sacred tree, high Rani.’

‘It stands in my way,’ she whispers to Rita. ‘I want it to die or burn so that it cannot entice anyone into unwanted thoughts! Why does the Maharajah go to this tree for counsel? In the past, he went to the Agramahisi!’

‘Ask a magician or a wise woman about life and death.’

‘You go and enquire in Gaya where a wise woman lives, Rita,’ she whispers to her confidante.

Rita does as instructed. She finds a woman who looks suitable, amongst the many to be found in Gaya who live on the superstition of the people. When Tishya enters the place, alone, she shivers for a moment because of the uncanny atmosphere of the dirty cavern.

‘What do you wish?’ she asks Tishya. Rita waits outside close to the entrance but Sinhi interrupts her with her chatter.

‘I want to know whether you can kill a tree.’

‘Kill a tree? Look for a woodcutter!’

‘But it has to happen unnoticed so that nobody will understand.’

‘Which tree?’

‘A pipala not far from here.’

‘You do not mean the sacred tree of the Buddha?’

‘Yes. That tree aggravates me; it has to go.’

The woman looks up, surprised. Then she says, with hatred in her eyes: ‘Me, too! The monks detest us wise women. They call us cheats. They worship a sacred tree, because it brought wisdom upon the Buddha! Every day many of them visit it, touch it, kiss it even! They venerate a tree while they make us, who probe with our manas the secrets of life and death, suspect. Why has that tree to go? Only because it aggravates you?’

‘Yes.’

‘It will be difficult.’

‘For a rich reward?’

‘How rich?’

Tishya takes out a costly piece of jewelry. Greedily the woman grabs it.

‘When you kill the tree, it is yours.’

‘And then, when you are safe with your necklace in Pataliputra, I may look for you like the Brahmins do for the elixir of life ... Upon my death! Find someone else for this dangerous job. The holy Maharajah protects the tree, ask him!’ she laughs mockingly.

‘Would you be able to perform the job?’ Tishya whispers.

‘I guess so. One can strangle a human being, why not a tree with life, like us! Give me that gold!’ she stretches out her skinny, greedy hands. Tishya gives her the necklace she once received from Asandhimitra.

‘When you succeed, I will give you another one.’ The woman walks to the light and with wide open eyes catches the glittering of the precious stones. Then she throws it into a hole in the back of the cavern.

‘See if it is of real gold and gemstone, Pandola!’ A snake lazily slithers forward and moves its head and tongue over the cool metal. ‘Pandola is an incarnation of my husband who died a few years ago,’ she whispers. ‘He was very good to me. He said he would be reborn in the first being that would come to this cavern. That was Pandola!’

Tishya draws back a few steps, frightened.

‘It is good,’ continues the woman, after having observed the snake for a while. ‘Pandola says they are real. Before the moon will be new again the tree will have died, high Rani. Then I expect the second half of my payment.’

Tishya does not ask how she knew that she is a Rani. The uncanny place and her own sin are enough to frighten her. She hastens out of the cavern and gives out an order for them to return to the capital. Sinhi is worried: the Rani has done something that the Maharajah will not approve of.

A few days later Tishya calls Rita. Rita is a vain girl and proud of the trust of the Rani.

‘Rita, you have to help me.’

‘If need be, I would go to the empire of the nagas⁴ for you.’

‘I do not ask that. It is in Pataliputra. It will remain a deep secret between you and me. Be especially aware of Sinhi whose tongue is like a pipala-leaf⁵.’

‘I promise you, high Rani.’

‘Go tomorrow to Tarata, the perfumer, and buy a jar of rose-oil from Baghdad.’ Rita is surprised: a full jar?

‘Tarata is a rich Vaishya, keen on gold!’

‘I am not bothered about the price. Buy at the same time the most expensive sandal-powder of the kind they call ‘oxen-head’. I also want a package of fine incense from Arabia.’

‘All that costs a lot of gold, high Rani.’

‘It has to be so; Tarata sells much to temples and priests. Not one of his customers is as rich as I am. Do not bargain, because I need his help.’

Early the next morning, Rita goes to Tarata and buys what her mistress has ordered. She returns indignant. ‘He wants two measures of gold for those perfumes, high Rani!’

Tishya hands over the gold to Rita.

‘As if I were a Princess so respectfully did Tarata speak to me. I have told him that my rich mistress will buy from him more often if he gives her the best of his merchandise. ‘Your mistress gets oils and herbs more refined than does the Shiva-temple at the King’s Road. I am fully at her service,’ said the man, bowing like a palm-leaf in the wind.’

‘Go tomorrow for a small jar of bandhujiva oil, and ask whether he knows a young priest, Katchayana. He serves in one of the temples.’

Tarata is full of zeal for his rich customer. For a week he leaves early each morning. His face turns even darker. In temple after temple, he offers the most delightful incense and in the end his question always is: Do you know a young priest Katchayana? No one ever answers. They know that Katchayana is under strict observation and they wish to protect him. When Tarata meets at last an old loose-lipped priest, this one says: ‘What do you want of him? You take much trouble to find him.’

‘A lady of very high rank wants to speak to him. Why, I do not know. Can you help me, noble Brahmin? Look here, a jar with the best of oxen-head sandal balm, healthy and a joy for the nose.’

The priest greedily inhales the beloved aroma and calculates.

‘If I warn Katchayana that he has to go to your house for ... sandal-balm?’

‘Holy Father, I thank you! Take this jar that Indra himself would not scorn!’

‘Tomorrow I will let you know when he comes.’

Tarata walks home as fast as his legs can carry him. He immediately alerts Rita that he has received a new kind of precious perfume. A little later, a message from Katcha comes in.

Rita learns that Katcha will be there at sunset.

Because of this Tishya Rakshita is driven into a tight spot. To visit a temple she could maybe do unnoticed. But a perfumer! At last, towards the evening, she leaves the anthapura, simply dressed, goes to the park and disappears by the great gate. Rita follows her. First, they take the King’s Road, but soon turn in a side street. Then they walk swiftly to the street of the perfumers and enter quickly the shop of Tarata. Sinhi follows them stealthily.

Katcha is already waiting. Tarata has offered a room for the two ‘lovers’, so he thinks. The two young people look at each other searchingly. Tishya laughs and Katcha, never averse to female beauty, is more than charmed by it.

‘Who wishes to speak to me?’ he asks, a little aloof.

‘Are you Katcha or Katchayana from Tirha?’

‘I was a brahmacharin there,’ he says, flushing.

‘And do you know Kanchanamala?’

Katcha is alarmed. ‘Yes ...’ What is it that this woman wants?

‘Do you hate Prince Kunala?’ she asks the man outright.

‘Why do you ask that, beautiful lady?’ The conversation disquiets him.

‘Because I hate him as well!’

‘Who are you?’

‘I am the youngest Rani of the Maharajah.’

‘You are very careless, high Rani,’ says Katcha, increasingly surprised. ‘Why do you hate Prince Kunala?’

‘Because he has once insulted me deeply. Then I threw my hatred in his face. And ever since I have feared him. When Maharajah Ashoka abdicates the throne I will be at the mercy of his successor.’

‘Will the Maharajah abdicate soon?’

‘Since the Agramahisi has died he has been thinking about it. I want the Maharajah to continue his reign!’

‘That is something I cannot help you with.’

‘But I do not want Kunala to succeed!’

Katcha smiles. ‘So I understand but I cannot prevent it.’ He is disappointed.

‘Together with someone filled with the same hatred one can achieve much!’

‘How do you want to arrange that?’ he asks while observing her beautiful figure.

‘That I do not know. It is precisely for that I called on you for help.’

‘So, you want to use my hatred for your personal end,’ laughs the young priest.

‘But you can use my hatred as well to take your vengeance! In that respect, we are equal.’

Katcha reflects for a long time. At last, he says seriously: ‘I am under strict observation by Ashoka’s secret service. I cannot leave Pataliputra. A small offence will bring me to the mines at the Gandaki. How can I help you then? You are on a dangerous path, high Rani. It is better if you were to try to reconcile with Prince Kunala. What can a woman do—even when she is a Rani of the Maharajah—against the tremendous power of Ashoka!’

‘And when I become the Agramahisi?’

‘Are you going to be that?’ he calls out, interested.

‘I want to become that.’

‘You play a dangerous game, high Rani! Forget your hatred!’

‘I want to put myself at stake. Not have others play with me! I know the history of the elephants in Tirha!’

‘I fear the mines at the Gandaki, high Rani!’

‘So even a man, a mighty Brahmin, recoils in fear at his own hatred!’ She laughs amicably, when she says it. ‘Am I, a woman, more courageous than you?’

‘I do not see a way. Women are more cunning and know no limits!’

‘Kanchanamala!’ She laughs. ‘Maybe, one of us will find a way. Say that you want to help me. Many people are united in love. Why should not

you and I be united in hatred?’

‘What you ask of me is dangerous. I am not even sure you will not bring ruin upon me, high Rani! If the Maharajah learns of this meeting!’

Tishya looks at him, startled. Then she says in all seriousness: ‘You are right. Listen. I am not a follower of the Buddha. Here, take my hand. We go seven steps together.’

Katcha immediately understands her and together they walk seven steps⁶ through the room. ‘Now, we are friends and friends do not betray each other. Do you still love Kanchanamala?’

Katcha blushes. ‘No, I hate her as much as Kunala. I lived under the illusion that she loved me and not Kunala. In the streets of Pataliputra she turned her face away from me. The beautiful eyes of Kunala made her forget her love for me, a Brahmin, together with the glitter of a royal court, I would think!’ For a short moment, an ominous darkness moves in his eyes and Tishya looks at him full of admiration.

‘For that loss, you have now won a friend,’ she says with some warmth in her voice. She knows that her charm has great influence. Katcha cannot keep his eyes off the beautiful figure and Tishya senses perfectly what touches him. For a brief moment she puts an arm around his shoulders and looks into his eyes with a smile.

‘Let Tarata warn me if you wish to speak to me. Leave a little later after I do. Little goes unnoticed with the spies of the Maharajah. See you later, my friend!’ Again, that charming laugh that burns into his young, sensitive soul. Katcha watches her off, not without fear, but yet touched by the friendship of the young Rani.

For Sinhi it remains hidden that her mistress spoke with Katcha.



THE DRIVING FORCE

In her palace at Vidisha, Devi receives the master of the ivory-carvers, Patani. All her thoughts are directed towards Sanchi. There arose the stupa of Ashoka, the young Ashoka, who was Viceroy of Avanti. Her love had been growing into a way of worship. His embracing of Buddhism was inevitable in line with their lofty love, which is, she believes, the driving force behind his great work and has its influence even there, where others take their place beside the Imperial Throne. Like an eagle that flies ever wider and higher, expanding the realm of his function, so does Ashoka's gaze sweep over his mighty empire. He has accepted other women in his anthapura. Kullika says they were practical considerations that prompted him to do so. He was impressed by Asandhi's beauty, but it was her wisdom that he needed for his ever-growing ideas. Kansa's daughter and Padmavati meant a consolidation and assurance of his power and were accepted as such. Tishya Rakshita, he had allowed because it was Asandhi's wish. But she, Devi, had been his all-overruling love. She did not lay claims, she was dedicated to him alone, and not to his imperial power or the pomp. Was it not she, who feared the grandeur of the court in Pataliputra? Kullika is her purohita and friend because, like her, he adores the Prince and Viceroy. She has set herself aside for Ashoka and her children and from afar she has watched him grow in power and glory, sharing the joy. But the love that had

come to them once as a sublime inspiration, kept encompassing her like the sun, as a warming glow. Her veneration of the Buddha drew its luster from his light. When he took refuge in the Buddha her happiness was complete. It could be said to be a fragile and wistful happiness, because he is so far away from her. But his work is good and accounts for a large part of her love. The way the caitya of Mahindra connects her with her son, the vihara of Sudeva with the Buddha, so is the stupa in Sanchi the inner bond with him, and that bond she strengthens with all her loving power. The stupa of Sanchi is the embodiment of her love for him, the highest disciple of the Buddha.

‘Well, I like it that you will place this beautiful symbol of the peacock at either end of the mid-beam of the northern torana. It is better this way rather than my Lord and I being portrayed as figures that bear little resemblance to ourselves. The house of the peacock, the Maurya. Try to carve it with the best of hard-wood, Patani. And this medallion of the Raja, the Maharajah ... such striking resemblance! Do you know the Maharajah so well?’

‘One cannot forget him, when one thinks in forms, high Rani.’

‘But now the jataka of Vessantara!’

‘It connects itself as a matter of course, with the beloved Prince, his wife and his children.’

Devi smiles. ‘Or else, Patani takes care to make it so that the Prince of the jataka and the Maharajah become one. Do you believe that the Maharajah is a benefactor, like Vessantara?’

‘I do not believe that, gracious Maharani, I know that. When the Prince lived here, the Deccan experienced it. The subjects pay their tribute; the Maharajah returns it to India. For this jataka, I wish to use the full beam of the eastern *torana*.’

‘Very well, Patani. You will certainly portray the jataka beautifully.’

‘An artist can create a masterpiece, when the subject touches him, high Rani. Everyone praises the beautiful carved features of Sri, the goddess of beauty and good fortune.’

Devi blushes. ‘You have given the features of a living human being, of a woman, to the statue of the goddess,’ she says timidly.

‘If you will forgive me, high Rani, that beautiful woman is for Avanti the goddess of good fortune, like her master Vessantara is for India.’

‘I will soon have a look at it. Have you finished the friezes of Mahindra’s caitya?’

‘Certainly. The caitya will be one of the most beautiful in India.’

Devi smiles happily. When Patani left, she goes to the terrace where Kullika is at work on the drawing of a new relief for the south-gate of the stupa. Kullika’s tall, somewhat bent figure, his healthy colour and the tranquil expression on his delicate features are witness to inner strength. The success of his great pupil has enriched his life.

‘Are you successful with your work?’ She bends over the inscribed palm-leaves.

‘When the subject is the sacred Maharajah, I always succeed. The Achemenids in Iran glorify in their lips their own glorious deeds; Ashoka proclaims universal humanity which is of the Atman. His word is ‘the’ word and his deed ‘the’ deed of the highest God. His own name he simply conceals¹.’

‘Should I have gone with him to Pataliputra, Kullika?’

‘No, but you would have if your love had encompassed not only Ashoka but also his world-reforming work, like Asandhi. Your love for him here will serve him better.’

‘Poor Asandhi! Will he mourn her death?’

‘Certainly. It is difficult for him to say farewell to his friends, even more difficult when they are noble friends and the most difficult when they work with him and feel so closely engaged with his high goal.’

‘And the youngest Rani?’

‘She is little loved; she was Asandhi’s favourite.’

‘As long as she loves Ashoka!’

‘They whisper she is pretending so.’

‘Does Ashoka say that, too?’

‘I think it is impossible that he would not know if it is true. Asandhimita wanted her at her side, and ...’

‘Is she beautiful?’

‘She is young, svelte, beautiful, a stately and regal figure.’

Devi remains in thought for a long time. Why did he leave this lovely Avanti? No! He is a tremendous blessing for the millions of people of India. Whether he himself is happy too, she does not know. Patani has carved her as Sri for the stupa in Sanchi. She, goddess of good fortune, of happiness.

And she herself does not even know what gives the human being happiness! Did Ashoka choose his hard life because it brought happiness to himself? The happiness of others! If he had sought his own happiness would he then have gone to Pataliputra? When Avanti became too small for his great power, he went to the capital, to the 'hell', said Revata. From those days onwards her happiness changed into a different kind of happiness: love for Ashoka, far away from Ashoka.

From afar she hears the sombre sound of conches. Warriors of the Maharajah! She has heard them so often yet every time it still awakens memories. The faithful Revata had to pay with his life for his friendship. Now Asandhi has died. Poor Ashoka! The conches sound near. A servant rushes into the room.

'The holy Maharajah, noble Maharani!'

'The holy Maharajah? Ashoka?'

The message moves her so much that she cannot keep herself upright. Kullika, overjoyed, walks towards the Maharajah. She waits. Ashoka approaches her, calmer than in the past, calmer in his movements. Then he takes her passionately in his arms. 'Devi!'

She does not reply. Her countenance reflects joy, surprise, alarm, but above all, love for the Prince. He has changed: he is older, more serious and more self-assured than in his younger days when restlessness always drove him on. He looks at her for a while and he sees how her countenance changes. In her cheeks a soft colour shines through like the timorous pink of dawn; her eyes radiate as she notices that he has for her the same tender glance. And she thanks the gods who saved his soul from the dark side of the might.

'So, my Devi, those are the eyes of Sanchi and Ujjain. How well you have kept your beauty! Thanks to inner joy and peace.'

'My Ashoka! That peace and that joy are shoots of a deeper emotion. I have been living on my beautiful memories. I do not know whether your thoughts reached out to Avanti in turbulent times but in my mind I always was with you, and that gave me great inner happiness.'

'These years were filled with such an overwhelming amount of work that I only could think in flashes of awareness of the two of us, my Devi. Pataliputra called me! Soon, I felt glad that you and the children had not

accompanied me into that cavern of death and yet I missed you the most, you who always gave me strength.'

'Here I could strengthen you; there I would have died.'

'Yes, yes, I remember! Now, however, everything has changed. I have been striving towards a goal to which I got closer and closer. Assandhi was my support. She has died and now I feel your absence again, which is exceeded only by my work.'

'Revata called Pataliputra a hell. Sanchi is my sacred home. It fills my life like the scent of flowers fill a room.'

'Pataliputra is the starting point of Buddha's teachings. From there its blessings must go forth over the world. I want to lead my peoples to a better, more sacred way of thought. Therefore I need you.'

'Do go to Sanchi with me tomorrow ... like we did before. You will find there the fulfilment of my work. Its limitation makes me happy. At the top of the hill lies the great thought of the Buddha as though folded together in a lotus bud. That gives me joy, because everyone around me encounters it with love and joy. Your vast thoughts are for me like the Ganga in the rainy season. I cannot endure animosity like you. One single wrathful person can spoil my happiness. Here, I have only good people around me. Tell me the truth: do you think that I can live there?'

'The truth! What is the truth, my Devi? I think it is truth which impels me into action. When I wake up it thrusts itself upon me, while in the night it drives away my sleep. Then it fades, loses its luster, a higher truth strives upwards, climbs over the first one, nudges that one aside, leaves it behind, and a new compulsion takes hold of me till ... yes, till! The truth is, I want you to accompany me to Pataliputra.'

'Then I will go with you, you have more right to me than I do myself.'

'Tomorrow we go to Sanchi.'

That night they sit together as they did in the past: Devi, Kullika, and the Maharajah. The following morning the elephants are ready.

'Oh, Sala! Just like then!'

'Careful!' Devi takes his arm.

'Sala and I have become friends years ago. An elephant never forgets.' Ashoka approaches the animal. The trunk swings up and a loud trumpeting cry of victory echoes through the place. A tit-bit is its reward for such fidelity.

‘Flowers and flowers, as if it were Vesanta, just like then in Sanchi,’ laughs Devi, and her laugh still has its old charm. ‘Ponds full of lotus-flowers! Look how they open with Surya’s magic rays; *kovidara* and *bakula* spread their scent to seduce the bees as does the white jasmine. How beautiful the agile climbers weave themselves through the tops of the forest! And see, over there, the swans and flamingoes in the brook ... How gloriously nature unfolds itself; now that the holy Maharajah has returned, everything welcomes him.’

‘It has sprung from the heart of the goddess of beauty and happiness, my Devi,’ he laughs at her.

‘Do you know that Patani carved Sri in the torana with my features?’

‘Otherwise your sweet blush would have betrayed it to me. Our youthful love in Sanchi has been the driving force behind my never ceasing quest. Sanchi always has my concern.’

‘That I have felt!’

For both it is like a pilgrimage along the holy places of their young love, the engagement, the two Brahmins, the sarei, the Ashoka-tree.

‘Here, I always feel happy again.’

‘So, you live in the past.’

‘For me the past and the here and now are one. Pataliputra would have broken it.’

Ashoka reflects whether it is right that he should persuade her to come to the capital. To disturb for his own wish the happiness of the one who is so firmly bound to him by that very Sanchi! They approach the hamlet hidden at the foot of the sacred hill. From between the ever-green khirni-trees, they could see the sanctuaries shimmering in the sun, gently rising up to the deep-blue heaven.

Like a gust of wind the rumour blows through the quiet hamlet through which the Rani and the Maharajah ride up to the sacred hill. Women who were pounding rice husks or winnowing in the wind, and those preparing food, leave their work. Goats, sheep and buffaloes, quietly lying on the road, obstructing the procession, are swiftly chased away. Ashoka looks on, touched by the sight of women hurrying to the creek—bearing earthen pots on their heads—to fetch water for the tired animals of the Rani. Men come out from the paddy and cane fields to see the holy Maharajah. And all kneel down as soon as Sala walks with calm ponderous tread through the village

and up the road to the sacred hill. At the top they are welcomed by the old Sudeva and other monks of the sangha. But Devi wants to take the Maharajah around by herself. He looks at everything with great interest, the sacred stupa surrounded by a finely carved wooden vedika with its four toranas. The top of the stupa, the harmika and parasol are also made of wood like the other bas-relief images of Buddha's life, along with jatakas, carefully framed with floral-motifs and the four main symbols: the elephant, the Bo-tree, the wheel, and the stupa. On the southern side rises the splendidly polished pillar with the Lions-capital from Chuny, sent here by Ashoka. Devi's attention is diverted more to other things, a peacock pair, the legends of the Buddha, the medallions, and other relief work.

'Did you read the lipis on the pillar, my Devi?'

'Yes.'

'Not of much interest to you,' he laughs, though a little disappointed.

A deep blush turns up on Devi's cheeks as she sees the Emperor's disappointment. Remorseful, she says: 'I did my best to make the stupa, the viharas and the caitya of Mahindra appealing to the pilgrims.'

'Very sweet of you, goddess of beauty and happiness, but wood lasts for only three generations of men.'

'How else?' she asks, upset.

'Stone! Only stone endures for centuries.'

'Stone? But who can chisel these finely carved images out of stone?'

'And what about the lions on my pillar? He who chisels such beautiful images in wood must be capable of expressing his art in stone as well in a way that touches the soul.'

'Ivory-carvers and wood-cutters?'

'He who is knowledgeable about one craft will also know the other. I will send you one of my sculptors who can teach them to make these images out of lasting material. Look here, the hill contains a wealth of stone that is easy to carve.'

'Will the people appreciate it? Deodar-wood is sacred.'

'So, too, are the grounds of India and the stone of Sanchi.'

'Vedika, toranas, harmika and umbrella ... all of stone so that it is eternal. The idea is beautiful, my Ashoka!'

They walk to the eastern side of the hill where the rim descends more steeply towards the plain. They halt for some time as they did in their

youth. The countryside waves its endearing beauty to the faroff distance. And Ashoka has to think of the confining enclosure of the anthapura. Devi looks up at him and then again at her beautiful country.

‘In Vesanta the *dhak*² flowers here,’ she says, ‘and everywhere in the fields the red strings of blossoms are glowing and the hill lights up in the lovely sunshine. It looks as though a heart-warming glow rises up from the earth to this hilltop. Every year, I believe, it is you who kindles the red light atop the hill where the Buddha lives in Sanchi.’

Her face acquires a youthful glow, her charming figure straightens up as if infused by an inner strength. It gives Ashoka joy and sorrow at the same time. She is one with this sacred landscape. She and Tishya Rakshita? They simply do not fit together!

Together they walk up the steps through the southern *torana* to the *pradakshina patha*³ at the bottom of the *anda*⁴. They walk three times around the stupa in honour of the Tathagata. Devi shows him the many legends carved in wood. Proudly she shows her Lord the Caitya of Mahindra, worked on with much love and finesse, where he lived during the period he stayed in Sanchi.

‘Here, our son has dwelt and meditated upon the sacred doctrine as a preparation for his great task. Day after day he visited me, and I him. He will convert the whole of Lanka to the Buddha, and now he reflects and works on the sacred books which will be for eternity.’

Ashoka notices with how much love the Caitya has been furnished and maintained, how a solitary flower in a vase has been placed here and there which shows Devi’s love for this son, who indeed became no ruler but an accomplished human being and an example for all eternity. This is Devi’s home. It is here she lives her love to its fulfilment.

The Emperor remains for some more time in Vidisha; the longer he stayed the more his conviction is strengthened that her love for him sublimates itself into love for Sanchi. Her loyalty is the loyalty to their stupa, her love for the caitya of Mahindra, is the love for her children, her veneration for the vihara of Sudeva, the veneration for the Buddha. Is it right to snatch her away from all that which is hers, verily her loving heart? Because he needs her? Devi in the anthapura! A golden oriole in a cage! Amazing how everything here is entwined with Ashoka as the Viceroy of Avanti! She is overjoyed, not because the Maharajah came to her, but

because her Wild Prince has returned to Sanchi. Not once does she ask about his life in Pataliputra; she is oblivious to it. She accompanies him on a journey to Ujjain, which gives her unutterable joy, because even there he comes to life for her again. But as soon as he talks about Pataliputra, it is as though her heart is confined by unyielding bonds that do not give way. When this becomes obvious to Ashoka, he knew that he has to return to the capital alone, as he had done in the past. One of his messengers informs him that the Bo-tree is wilting. That hastens his departure.

‘Do you not wish me to join you?’ she sobs. Her grief that she is going to lose him once more is hard to bear but the thought to have to go to the capital, is harder still.

‘When I come here again, I would miss you too much!’

His sad smile hurts her and yet she is so grateful.

‘That return will be a great celebration for me. Be often with me in your thoughts.’

He takes fond leave of her, jumps into the saddle and the horse brigade disappears into the dust-cloud that swirls up from the Ashoka Road. For Devi it is as if his figure is shimmering for a long time yet in the wispy haze of dust between the trees.

‘Birth, old age, sickness, death ... being separated from those we love ... that is the first truth of suffering, Kullika ...,’

Ashoka returns swiftly to the capital. That Devi’s love does not oblige her to join him does not sadden him. The faithfulness to her first love touches him too deeply. The life in the anthapura cannot be her life!

In the vihara in Gaya there is great turmoil because the sacred tree of the Buddha appears to be dying. Pious upasakas carries water, even milk, to drench the roots. Ashoka immediately summons the most competent gardeners of Pataliputra’s nursery. Guards are placed around the tree. The Maharajah then proceeds, saddened that the sacred tree which played such an important role in the ascent of the Shakya-son to Buddha-hood is also subject to the law that rules all that lives: that nothing endures forever, that everything that becomes, perishes!

At night time, after his first talk with Radhagupta, who had deputised for him, he goes to Padmavati. She is glad at his return.

‘Do you want to accompany me tomorrow to the camp, my Padmavati?’

‘You know, Sire, that I do not like to receive the accolades of your subjects or pretend an interest that I do not have.’

‘I wish you to accompany me and appear in the parishad tomorrow.’

Padmavati laughs and shakes her head. ‘Leave that to the younger ones, Lord! Tishya loves pomp and show and likes to watch the prostrating subjects from the high howda. I derive more pleasure out of being in the anthapura or in the park.’

Sinhi is summoned to the Maharajah’s working quarters.

‘Rise, Sinhi, and take place over there. Do you have something to report?’

‘Much, gracious Maharajah.’ And she recounts, in an uninterrupted torrent of words, about Tishya’s exuberant joy over the journey to Gaya, her peculiar behaviour at the Bo-tree, the disdainful way in which she talked about the tree as if she were jealous, her talk about killing the tree that she even kicked, and her visit to the wise woman to whom she handed a precious piece of jewellery. At last, she tells him about the visit to Tarata, and that Rita had been there several times to buy perfumes.

‘What was the reason of that visit?’

‘I have not been able to find that out, noble Maharajah.’

Astounded and highly displeased, the Maharajah orders a rigorous investigation to be set in motion by the pradesika in Gaya and at Tarata’s, but the perfumer is a shrewd man. Then the Maharajah orders Tishya to come to him. She does not seem to surmise in the least the reason for his summons; the friendliest smile still adorns her beautiful face. The sight does not prevent the Maharajah from going straight to the point.

‘What caused the young Rani to kill the sacred Bo-tree?’

Tishya turns pale. All kinds of thoughts fly through her head. Who has betrayed her? How can she save herself? She falls down on her knees and presses his cloak against her forehead.

‘Forgive me, Lord. I could not bear that my beloved Maharajah valued the influence of a tree more than my opinion. It is as Asandhi always said: my feelings sometimes overrule completely my reasonability. As soon as I come to my senses, I regret, Lord.’

Ashoka reflects for a while. Does he have to fall behind Asandhi who always knew how to direct Tishya to better thoughts? He looks down at her for a long time but she does not raise her eyes.

‘Get up, your friend, the wise woman, did not succeed in crushing out the sacred Bo-tree.’

‘How fortunate, Lord! That wise woman is not my friend; she is an enemy of the Buddha, Lord. Protect the sacred tree against her and her likes!’

‘I thank you for your advice, Rani,’ he says, icily. ‘I will have the tree protected by a wall and place guards at the entrance of the building to safeguard it from the whims of foolish women. What did you want to know from the wise woman?’

Tishya breathes more freely again. So, the Maharajah does not know anything about her talk! She replies slowly, ‘Who would become the Agramahisi, Lord?’ The smile returns; the one that could melt the heart of the hardest of men, so certainly the old Maharajah!

‘That is of great concern to you, Tishya!’ he says earnestly.

‘It was of concern to me, Lord. Now you have chosen Devi, my restlessness has ceased.’ Tishya has understood why Devi has not come along from Vidisha.

Ashoka looks at her. Is the appearance of this fiery, impulsive-natured woman so misleading, that he once again makes an error?

‘Why does the youngest Rani visit the perfumer Tarata?’

Ashoka’s piercing look confuses her. What does the Maharajah know? At this new and unforeseen attack, fear takes hold of her, more than before, as from an unexpected blow. With the greatest of effort she keeps herself under control and hides her tension behind her most enticing way of making eyes.

‘I wanted to choose the perfumes myself, to please my Lord. Asandhi was always very choosy about it. How much more do I then have to be!’

‘Why?’

‘Asandhi was loved for her inner being, her wisdom and her distinguished beauty. She was a noble Brahmin lady. I ...’

‘You hesitate, Tishya.’

‘Yes, Sire, I hardly dare say it: I am a Kshatriya from the jungle, short-tempered as a cobra, easily insulted like an elephant, Asandhi used to say. She always knew, with a friendly word, a compassionate glance, how to bring me to better insight.’

‘But there has to come a moment in our lives when we do not have to lean anymore on others.’

‘Yes, Sire.’ And again, her face breaks into the most charming smile. ‘Perhaps, I am too young to realise that. Did I lose my beloved friend too early!’ She sobs.

‘Perhaps, Tishya. Let us hope that her death will be a strong motivation for you, that your heart may at last guide you to the right way, the one of the Buddha. You have to be an example to other women in my empire.’

‘Yes, Lord. Your judgement always strengthens the inner being.’

Ashoka had wanted to be firm with the youngest Rani. Now again he has the strong feeling that Asandhi could better comprehend this daughter of the mahavana. He does not look for confidentiality and trust from Tishya, but Karuvaki and Padmavati do not have any interest in what, for him, is his very life. And this young Rani, impelled though she is by her vanity or even fear of life, could perhaps be awakened to an interest in it, if he is able to guide her properly. She alone now is eligible to become the Agramahisi. In the past, in moments of doubt, the discerning judgement of Asandhi had been of great value to him. Now the role of the Agramahisi will be merely representative: to be present by his side on the imperial elephant, in the parishad, at receptions for envoys. Nothing more. And Tishya is an impressive figure who could represent well the outwardly importance of the Agramahisi.

When Tishya returns to her room she bursts out laughing.

Rita asks, ‘Did the high Rani have a nice talk?’

‘Yes! How many living beings did Manu create, Rita?’

‘Millions, high Rani.’

‘And which, of all those beings, is the most stupid?’

‘A parrot, high Rani. He echoes only what someone else says.’

‘Echoing is wise, Rita, when others do not know where that wisdom comes from.’

‘An elephant then, which is as strong as a thousand of men, allowing itself to be led by a foolish mahout ...’

‘No Rita, a man!’ Tishya could not stop laughing. ‘A man who is sometimes as strong as a hundred thousand of men and allows himself to be led by one single silly woman!’

‘That is what the woman thinks, but the man decides, high Rani.’

‘One single woman is more cunning than a hundred thousand of men.’

‘But his might is stronger than that of a thousand women.’

‘He does not see through her when she is clever enough.’

‘When the guile fails he becomes dangerous, high Rani.’

Startled for just a moment Tishya looks at her, and then she laughs again.

Before the next meeting of the parishad, Ashoka visits Tishya.

‘You will accompany me to the parishad as the Agramahisi.’

A wild joy comes over her. She wants to fly up and embrace the Maharajah, kiss him. She wants to yell like the hunter in the mahavana, to dance to ease her tense nerves. But she does nothing of it. Instead she remains standing, erect and composed. She looks at the Maharajah and realises she has to hold on to her dignity. Kneeling down, she kisses the hem of his cloak.

‘I thank you, gracious Maharajah, for the trust you place in me.’ She sobs for a moment.

‘You are the youngest of the Ranis. Try always to keep your dignity as the first one amongst the women, and forget once and for all, what you retain in your memory of your youth in the jungle. A Rani, and certainly the Agramahisi, has to be an example for all women. In the future you will devote yourself to the well-being of my peoples. This is what your high position is all about!’

It is a fantastic dream for Tishya Rakshita. As a radiant Empress she appears beside the holy Maharajah in the parishad. He introduces her as the Agramahisi of the great empire, and in her eyes gleams victory. Whoever speaks a friendly word to her is rewarded with a smile that makes the high council of the parishad almost forget its rigid dignity. On the tour through the town, announced by gong and messengers, her wildly thumping heart can scarcely contain the many accolades, heaped on the new Agramahisi. Her youth and her charm, her joyful radiating face at the cheering of: ‘Hail to the Agramahisi’, her participation in the general joy of the populace, gives to the Maharani and the people a golden memory, which greatly pleases the Maharajah; in this way it will be easier for Tishya to turn to the interests of others, which will be good for both ... So hopes the sacred Maharajah.

With irresistible power the announcement to the people lures Katcha to the street as well. Lonesome, the young priest watches the parade. When the imperial elephant approaches, his eyes look at the Maharani with longing. He was not able to forget her, not her smile, not her eyes, which had penetrated his. They overwhelm him, not by their earnestness, as with Kancha, but by their mystical female charm. A strange passion, powerful and wild, coursed through him and suffocated him with an inexpressibly sad happiness. Now his hungry eyes are riveted on her, waiting, just as he had been waiting for days, weeks. He stands there, in deep concentration, not moving a muscle, his whole being focused in his gaze. The magic of it ought to attract her attention, and it does. Involuntarily she glances to his side and for a few moments, as she passes by, her eyes rest on his. Then she laughs and for a brief moment her hand moves—imperceptible to the Maharajah—and it seems as though the hunger in his eyes is satiated now that she passes by, not cold, not as if he was a stranger. He does not move. Fortunately! For in the midst of Katcha's silent admiration for the Maharani, the Emperor turns to him and recognises him. The young Brahmin, however, stops arousing his interest.

Sunk in dejected thoughts, he wanders around the city. What can he expect of the Agramahisi? Nothing but a dangerous, useless adventure! Does he still want to avenge Kunala now that his love for Kancha has disappeared?

Tishya Rakshita is worried. Katcha had stood on the road so still, as though he did not know her. Does he have regrets for their bond of friendship? She does not wish to lose his support! She has to speak to Katcha! Does she dare to go to Tarata? She waits. She has to! So she does, with unbearable patience, until the Maharajah leaves for Bodh Gaya to see the new construction. Swiftly, she sends Rita to Tarata for a perfume to get rid of her headache. Katcha! Now! Even more cautious than the last time, she looks for the street of the perfumers. Only Rita joins her. Katcha is at Tarata's. His eyes light up with joy when she brings on her magic smile. Ardently, she grabs his hand and keeps it in hers.

‘Katcha, why was your gaze so dark and still the other day.’

‘Noble Maharani ...’

‘Noble Maharani? I do not call you ‘High Brahmin’, do I?’ And she laughs at him so encouragingly, that it confuses him. ‘My name is Tishya, Tishya Rakshita.’

‘Sri!’

Suddenly Tishya becomes serious, and she clutches his hand even more tight. ‘Goddess of happiness? No, Katcha ... Where I am, happiness gives way! Do I give you happiness?’

‘No! You fill my heart with deep agony. Day and night! Since I have met you I have known no respite. It is as if I slide down a slope that leads into the darkest of depths. Where are you leading me?’

‘I laugh at what my environment calls happiness, the veneration of the Buddha, bah! That kind of happiness does not exist for me, Katcha! You are my only friend but what binds us is not happiness! We are united by hatred, Katcha! Not because of happiness are we united, but that we are united is happiness for us, Katcha!’ And she laughs again at him, carefree. ‘How do you call me, Katcha?’

‘Morning sun, because you will scorch me later on!’

‘Well, maybe, my fire will be quenched before the afternoon glare burns you!’

‘Then I shall call you my Black Star.’

She laughs. ‘Black Star! Whose light is dimmed to extinction. Not yet, Katcha!’

‘No, your light is more beautiful than Ushas’ red glimmering. Do you yourself know how enticing it is?’

‘No, tell me,’ she whispers. And her laugh ensnares him, taking his breath away. Then suddenly, his hands take hers, he embraces her and a warm glow colours her cheeks. Her eyes open wide and shining as if they are drinking in his eager looks. A wild passion flares inside him. He kisses her unrestrainedly and Tishya responds to his love with complete surrender.

She leaves, laughing: ‘I will send you a message, Katcha, when I come back!’

‘Say, when!’

‘When I am able to! And will you please not doubt again our friendship, and our love? Our hatred?’ she whispers.

‘The morning sun shines with mild rays!’ he, too, laughs.

‘And the Black Star is maya!’

Rita stamps about impatiently to and fro in Tarata’s storeroom.

‘You risk too much, gracious Maharani! Think of the last time!’

‘Who is the most stupid one in Manu’s world, Rita?’ she laughs.

Rita keeps silent. Sinhi thinks the Maharani was out only to buy perfumes.



THE NEW KUMARA

‘Eumenes, how is it possible that a Hellene sculptor feels called upon to create such a frieze!’

‘Because I feel one with the people of India.’

Philon, dressed in chiton and belt, looks around the workshop of Eumenes and sniffs disdainfully. Zetes laughs.

‘So, you have adapted yourself to the barbarians!’ Philon mocks. ‘Are we Greeks not far superior to all these peoples? Do you have temples here like those in our mother country; the Pantheon of Iktinos, the temple of Zeus in Olympia, the bas-relief of Phidias, murals like those of Apelles? And that which is found of art here is of Hellenic origin! If Alexander had not come from Macedonia to this country of barbarians, they would still make their temples and palaces from wood! The pillars look like the spindly shanks of a hungry sailor of Odysseus, the mausoleums are circular heaps of stone within a small fence!’¹

Zetes, swift and well-muscled, jumps up from the rough slab of rock he was sitting on:

‘Why no thatched huts as their palaces and temples, like the philosophers have here! Raja Ashoka has allowed builders and stonemasons from Bactria and Iran: of course, Hellenes, who have to teach the

inept woodcarvers of India how to make a column, an abacus, a capital. A solitary pillar is the sole architecture of India. Look at our temples with a hundred mighty pillars! And those figures of wood! Compare them with Phidias' Athens and Zeus of gold and ivory! Have you ever seen an image of their most important god, Buddha?'

Eumenes bursts out laughing:

'Their most important god Buddha! You are such an arrogant Hellene that you cannot appreciate all that is great in this country. Have you any idea of Brahman? The Greek Zeus is a miserable human being compared to Brahman: the All-Spirit of the universe, contained within the life-giving force and pristine beauty, which unfolds itself in everything that lives, and thus makes all life a fragment of itself. Is that statue of Zeus or of Athene which you admire so much anything more than a statue of a human being with all its gross failings? Give me, O, gods, the power to carve the Brahman out of stone! The Greeks have always wanted to show the mortal, the finite, in their art, the divine as the sublime idealised human beauty! The people here believe that nature in its thousands of forms represents that beauty much more perfectly. But who can give form to immortality, the infinite, the Spirit! And what are you talking about: 'their most important god Buddha?' The Buddha was no god, he was a human being who, by his extraordinary spiritual powers, elevated himself to the state of a radiant example, a state a human being can reach when he purifies his soul of all that is worldly in him, the purity of spirit, rising up from the white lotus, and calling on the earth as witness, with all the serenity of triumph over the earthly. We Hellenes want to portray physical man in divine perfection, yet in his finiteness. The people here try to represent the spiritual man in his infiniteness! The Greeks built their temples to the marvel of human beauty, balance, and purity of form. The Indians desire to enshrine in their temples the celestial, the intangible, the Brahman. Therefore, the Maharajah avails himself of our help and our experience. It is easy to call everyone who is not a Greek a barbarian. Who are you Philon? A Hellene and a wanderer like me, born outside of your native country, and fancying yourself far above the people here. It is more difficult to prove that you yourself are not a barbarian. Look here.' Eumenes brings him to a fragment of the frieze and continues. 'This is of the life of the Buddha, how he rejected the sensual opulence of the royal court and chose the path of the highest spiritual being. It is meant for the new palace of the Viceroy. I feel that I, with my Greek

ideas, cannot by far match the lofty flight of their spirits. Five times I have tried to portray the Buddha and five times I have destroyed my work. I cannot give it a form that will gratify their high idea, because I am not from this culture.'

Philon and Zetes look at the beautiful frieze with interest for some time, with its images of the departure from Kapilavastu of the Shakyason on Kanthaka, the horse, under the protection of the gods; Yakshas support the horse's hooves so that no one will hear their stamping in the night.

At last Philon says:

'Well done, Eumenes, apart from those foolish little images under the hooves of the horse that goes against all reality. This is the work of a Hellene.'

'But in their spirit! Foolish little images you say! How would you express in a more profound manner, the love of the devas for the endeavour of the Bodhisattva? They assist, so that the retreating Bodhisattva will not be heard in the silent streets of the town at night. India will keep striving resolutely, and will become as capable as us! Their religion encompasses eternity; our gods die when our people do. They perceive us, too, as the unfolding of the Brahman. How much greater is their vision than yours, Philon. Maharajah Ashoka wished that works of art be immortalised in stone, Zetes. Therefore, he does not hesitate from inviting artisans from far-away countries to instruct and train his workers, thus elevating himself over and above your narrow tribal pride. Under his mighty hand their art will bud, flower, and bear fruit ... when Greek art will have perished long since and only its remains are left. Do not disparage these people! Did your forefathers have physicians such as the ones from Taxila, astronomers such as in Ujjain, scholars of language like Panini²? Through your petty frame of mind you view an Indian as a barbarian, similar to a Turanian or a Scyth or a Gaul, only because he is not a Greek.'

Eumenes resumes his work. They look on, and the hammering interrupts further talk. When he steps back a moment later to look at the result, he says thoughtfully: 'When are you leaving Taxila?'

'When we are forced to!' Zetes snaps.

'Why are you interfering in a revolt of another country?'

'Alexander conquered Taxila, it belongs to the Greeks!'

‘Oh, so ...’ Eumenes laughs. ‘When it does not belong to Seleucus who lost it, then it is for Diodotos to take over.’

‘And right he is!’ Philon calls out with lightning eyes. A common worker approaches the Hellenes and waits at a respectful distance.

‘Which right?’ Eumenes asks seriously.

‘Can those weak kings or holy Maharajahs protect their country? The glorious days of our people’s were the days of the Trojan, Persian and the Peleponesian wars! Those emanated power! What are the Greek people without their wars and warriors!’

‘So, let us be happy that Ashoka wants peace. Otherwise, he would wipe off the face of the earth your beloved Bactria, together with Sogdania and Margiane.’ Eumenes turns to the workman. ‘Sand down this piece of work, Tana, and put the colours to it.’ He himself takes up his chisel and hammer again, while Tana keeps working in the vicinity of the three Hellenes.

‘When does the son of that king of peace appear?’ Philon asks.

‘The sooner the better! The strife that you and the other Yavanas have been sowing here, we have already tolerated too long. The Taxilans do not like at all your instigating; only the ones who are not natives here do, the traitors of the land and its people! Taxila reveres Ashoka!’

‘Especially his honey-sweet peace!’ laughs Philon.

‘And let him enjoy the pleasures of his hermetically closed-off anthapura!’ mocks Zetes.

‘Return to the land of Zoroaster, who wishes to teach the ‘servants-of-the-lie’ with the sword! The ‘honey-sweet’ peace of the Maharajah does not mean that he will joyfully embrace the insurrectionary Hellenes. The young Kumara is a true son of his great Father. Since the death of Raja Kala, who with the fatherly indulgence of the Maharajah enforced obedience on the Hellenes who were taking the law into their own hands, you have been shouting at the marketplaces about injustice in the West; you mocked the construction of the great stupa, ridiculed the mendicant monks, praised the insurgent Diodotos, who was expanding his kingdom with Hellenic force; you falsely convinced the Taxilans that Punjab is actually the territory of the Bactrian King. And you have incited those who were not Buddhists against Kala’s ministers, urged them not to pay taxes, because they would only go

to monasteries. Soon, you will be able to reap the harvest of your work: prison, stake, the arrow! Go back to Bactria!’

‘If the Mauryas continue as they do now it will soon be all over for their empire!’ Zetes mocks. ‘Missions instead of armies, monasteries instead of army camps, timid monks lowering their eyes instead of warriors, who open their proud eyes wide to life! Is Raja Kunala different from his compassionate father?’

‘Wait and see, Zetes. Who knows whether he will save your head!’

Kunala’s army proceeds to Indraprastha, taking the more northern trade-route through the Punjab. It nears the promontory area of the Himalayas and follows the road to Ravalpindi, where in a friendly river-valley a fortified camp is set up for Kancha. Kunala himself, with the main army, takes the last part of the road to Taxila. No delegation from the city is there to meet him. Neither does he demand entry, his army crossing swiftly the Tamra Nala and descending to the hilly land east of Taxila. He immediately orders the closure of all entrances to the city and then proceeds to the palace in the new part of the town, north of the Hathial, a group of hills north of Taxila. The city was expecting a strong attack by Kunala’s mighty army. Yet, everything is quiet. Maybe, he will send a delegation? Nobody appears. From their high and wide walls the Taxilans look on. The unrest is growing: caravans no longer come in nor go out. The water-carriers no longer risk coming down the steep banks of the Tamra Nala. Does the Kumara want to starve them or let them thirst for water? The population gathers anxiously in the square in front of the old government building. The ministers failed to welcome the new Kumara and closed the gates. Kala’s ministers had to abdicate their place for them, those who resisted were killed. They are insurgents! Kunala’s unfamiliar approach worries them. They do know, however, that when their time comes, the Mauryas will strike. Ashoka! Killing Virata with one throw of the chakra!

The murmuring of the people increases by the minute: it rises from the gathered crowd, first softly, hardly audible, then louder: ‘Hail to the Kumara!’ The ministers from behind the thick walls curse the perfidious populace. They will have to flee but the Kumara has blocked all the roads; or they have to surrender, and then their death is equally certain. They consult. The Kumara is a Buddhist, and maybe, his compassion is greater than his feeling of revenge. The storm at the palace square fills the air: ‘Hail

to the Kumara! Hail to the Kumara!’ It thunders through the town, they had not lost their trust in the Maharajah. The soldiers keep watch on the walls and from the towers.

‘Chase them away from the square!’

‘Then the Maurya will turn against the gates!’

‘Hail to the Kumara!’ Outside, it sounds ever more urgent.

‘Reassure the people or we are finished!’ Philon calls out. Along with Zetes, Philon has sneaked into the building.

‘How? Who has kindled the rebellion here! Who jeered the former ministers! Tell us how you wish to put out the fire which you yourself kindled!’

‘Tell them you will decide tomorrow. Tonight we will try to escape.’

So, it is decided. The senior-most minister appears at the steps and raises his hand. All keep silent.

‘Citizens of Taxila! Tomorrow the council will decide what we have to do. Return to your homes and wait calmly!’

‘Decide now!’ ‘We do not wait any longer!’ ‘All hail to the Kumara!’ ‘No tarrying!’

Again, there rises a thundering protest against the council of the insurgents. No gesture of the minister can avert it. The people know: A conquering army knows no mercy!

‘Away with the Yavanas, the Hellenes!’ ‘All hail to the Kumara!!’

The minister withdraws and the council confers once more, even as the cries of the anxious people are coming across to them. Taxila has been overcome by fear. A delegation will go tomorrow morning to see the Kumara. Thus it is announced to them again, but by then it is too late.

‘Now!’ ‘Open the gates!’

‘Do you then want to go to the Kumara with empty hands?’

‘Yes!’ ‘Open the gates!’

Finally, they decide to send a delegation over the Hathial. The people calm down only when a group of ministers leaves the gateway with a flag of peace, and trudge with a strong guard from Kunala’s army, to the new palace.

Kunala receives them coldly. ‘What do you want?’

‘Lord, we open the gates when you want to take over Taxila in peace.’

‘I do not ask for opening the gates of my father’s city. It is the people of Taxila who ask you to do so,’ Kunala remarks calmly.

The ministers look embarrassed. How does he know what is happening inside the city?

‘What conditions do you place upon us, O, Kumara?’

‘I wait for the conditions that the Taxilans will place upon the Yavanas and their henchmen. Report that to me before I enter the city!’

The delegation realises that further negotiations are of no use. When they return to the city empty-handed, the unrest amongst the citizens grows manifold. On command, groups of soldiers infiltrate the crowd but they fail to enforce the command of the government to maintain order: Soon the Maurya will come! The people may receive mercy but not the insurgents and their soldiers! More and more the fury mounts against the government. The crowd pushes forward to the palace: ‘All hail to the Kumara!’ It sounds more threatening. Again, a few ministers appear on the steps.

‘The Raja does not want to state conditions. You have to surrender with or without promises of mercy! Do you want to be trampled by the elephants? Take up your arms yourself! Maybe, the surrounding countries will come to our help. It is better to fight to death than to be haplessly killed by the barbarians!’

‘What did the Kumara say?’ someone cries through the unhappy silence of the crowd.

‘Nothing. Surrender!’

‘Open the gates!’ The calls thunder again over the square. ‘Grab the insurgents!’ The jostling towards the government building becomes unstoppable. They force themselves into the halls, take hold of a few ministers and hand them over to the infuriated crowd, who finishes them off. Then the Yavanas are taken prisoners and locked up in the subterranean dungeons. The Kumara himself will judge them! They go to the gate, driving the scapegoat-deputies before them. When they approach the palace over the Hathial, they all cry: ‘Hail to Kumara!’

Kunala appears again in front of the palace. So, these are the citizens of Taxila! A few venture forward, falling on their knees and bowing down to the ground. Then the most senior of the former ministers takes the floor and says that the citizens regret having allowed themselves to be misled by the Yavanas. Once again, they wish to pledge their loyalty to the sacred

Maharajah and the Kumara. And thus they hope peace will be restored in the city. The worst of the rabble-rousers are taken captive and the foreigners imprisoned in the government building. They beg the Raja to enter the old city and take possession of it again.

‘Citizens of Taxila, we are pleased that you come to better insight. Go back to your work quietly. My measures I will announce in the city. The insurgents have to be handed over to my soldiers. We will decide who is guilty and who is not in the court. After I have brought the Rani from Ravalpindi, I will enter your government house. Return and obey my orders!’

A loud cheer resounds over the place: ‘All hail to the Kumara!’ Then all return to the old city over the Tamra Nala, relieved and happy. Kunala’s warriors have already entered and rouse the admiration of the Taxilans because of their equipage; looting seems far from their minds. Philon, Zetes and the traitors are imprisoned.

Kunala returns to Ravalpindi to fetch Kancha.

‘Taxila surrendered without a fight and the insurgents are killed or imprisoned!’ When he tells her how he has ‘conquered’ the old city, she laughs at him:

‘My spouse has the wisdom of his father,’ she says.

‘But what about the Yavanas and the Taxilan insurgents?’

‘Insurrection against the Emperor is treason and demands the death penalty!’ She says sternly.

‘My father might not approve of that. Mercy before Justice! But no government can maintain itself when it does not firmly suppress a revolt, Kancha, as a measure against further uprisings.’

‘No. Power demands hard measures against the demons!’

Both think immediately of Tishya Rakshita, and Kancha could not free herself from the memory of that other enemy who stared with compelling eyes at the road in Pataliputra and at the gate in Mathura. Pondering, she looks on Vida’s high back over the hills, which rise yonder into mountains and even further to the mighty snowy peaks of the Meru. The clear dry air of the Punjab in Hemanta expands the vision to far away infinity. Then her gaze wanders across the fields, along the Tamra Nala, over the twisting brooks and canals which by the grace of the concern of the Mauryas make the land fertile and coaxes rice, *bosmorem*³ and sugar cane into double

harvests. The woods stretch out high up the hills into the apparently steep mountainside. On top of one of the hills stands an immaculate white monastery that looks down over the rich fields with solemn sensitive eyes, as though compelling it to peace and compassion.

‘Why cannot peace rule over humanity eternally, but must conquerors, one after the other, have to distress this beautiful country!’ the young Rani sighs. ‘You come here to subdue the revolt ... like your predecessors!’

‘It looks like strife is in the blood of people, Kancha. Maybe, the Buddha will succeed in creating in mankind a longing for peace. But behind the Indus and the Hindukush there is always raging a war. That is what my father forgets.’

‘Your father brought here, with only a small army and by his mere personality, peace and prosperity. And it makes me happy that the first step of my Kunala did not lead to bloodshed.’

‘Blessed are you, my beloved Kancha. Are the Taxilans only now becoming aware that my father has a mighty army at his disposal? Will these easily inflamed people ever discover in themselves the power, to determine their actions with their manas instead of with their easily swayed feelings? Will there not always be people who can only be coerced with a heavy hand to what the peace-loving wish? Is the Buddha’s word and spirit enough? My father has never given a thought—perhaps rightly—to what the sara of all evil is in this world! And maybe, that is what drove him to fatherhood over all his peoples. The evil which provokes the good. Perhaps, I have to ask for the blood of some Yavanas and traitors.’

‘The vast majority of these people chose, in their innate wisdom, my husband over the pugnacious Macedonians. Certainly, they must have realised that behind his compassion is a huge army, but they also surmise that the spirit of the son is kindred to that of his father.’ Her gaze wanders towards the city that from afar is rising up on one of the hills in the verdant land. The walls and towers are sharply etched in the serene air against the deep-blue vault of heaven.

‘Taxila!’ she calls out happily. ‘Look there. What is it that is moving yonder on the road to the city?’

Kunala looks keenly. ‘That is not hard to guess! The population in festive attire streams out to welcome with colourful banners and splendid presents the new Kumara and his Rani, to propitiate them because of their

guilty hearts, and to avoid being looted.’ He smiles. ‘If they had truly placed their trust in me then they would have kept their valuable presents ... for a new uprising!’

Now Kancha laughs, too: ‘Maybe, it is Sampadi’s turn then!’ A deep longing for her child is stirring her heart.

Once again a great procession of Taxilans comes out to meet a Maurya. Once again the senior-most ministers come up in front to seek to excuse themselves, and long rows of young girls—the most distinguished of the town—dressed in brightly coloured muslin are carrying baskets of fresh flowers. Again, the disarmed soldiers march along in the procession, while young men carry beautifully carved vases of gold and silver, or bowls chiselled from amethyst or sardonyx, full of gemstones, pearls and artistically wrought jewellery to the young Raja. On all their faces one can read anxiety; the city is guilty because of its betrayal of the holy Maharajah. Yet, now too, there is hope that this Maurya will grant mercy to the city. Everywhere along the road citizens are lining up, curious as to how the surrender will end. Fortunately, the entry is less dramatic than was Ashoka’s, many years ago. When Kunala heard the old minister Sudinna with the complaint that the Yavanas have usurped the government and either chased away or killed the former ministers, he speaks kindly to them. He hopes that the Taxilans will re-establish peace and will again be loyal subjects of the holy Maharajah.

There is joy among the rows that spread along the roads. Cheers buffet like a gale towards the old city: ‘All hail to the Kumara!’ Vida’s howda is buried under the fragrant weight of colourful flowers. When the young people present the gifts, Kancha has a friendly smile for all. They then return in one great procession, the royal couple on Vida in front, surrounded by Ashoka’s archers. Amidst a cheering crowd they approach the city. Kunala is Lord of the West. Everyone is full of admiration for the young, beautiful Mauryas, who, from then on, will live in the new palace over the Hathial. But Kunala is concerned: he is the Lord Supreme Justice of the Punjab, he will have to judge the Yavanas and the disloyal Taxilans. His father waits for what he will decide. Will the insurgents have to pay with their blood for their guilt? And he is the judge who has to demand!

Energetic like all the Mauryas, he is forming a court the following morning. His army chief Bhatta and his purohita Vagisa will take part in the decisions. He could have pronounced the sentence right away and have it

carried out but he knows that this is not in accordance with his father's principles of justice! Yet, he deals swiftly with the traitors, the Taxilans who have escaped the people's tribunal the night before. The establishment of treachery is enough to instantly pronounce the death penalty. The large numbers of people which fill the great court hall listen to the judgment in deathly silence.

Then it is the turn of the Yavanas. Philon and Zetes are brought together before him. Kancha attends the court. For a while Kunala observes both the Greeks, their muscular physiques, the splendid care of their bodies and their clothing. And suddenly a feeling of compassion rises up in him – to condemn those people to death? In spite of their imprisonment there is in their eyes something that speaks of freedom and independence. Their gaze, open and frank, faintly irritates the Kumara, though.

‘You are Philon, a Yavana from Bactria?’

‘Yes, O, King.’

‘Are you related to king Diodotos?’

‘No, Sir, I am a Hellene like him.’

‘Why do you, a free and independent man, incite the subjects of Maharajah Ashoka against their lawful ruler?’

‘This country belonged to the Macedonian, and so now to his successors.’

‘Let us go back a little further,’ Kunala replies calmly: ‘This country belonged to the King Poros of India, and thus now—according to you yourself—to his Indian successors.’

‘Alexander conquered the country, Sir.’

‘Chandragupta re-conquered it, after him!’

Philon feels his defense weakening. Then his pride wins: ‘The high civilisation and development of the Greek people gives them a sacred right over barbarians.’

For a brief moment, anger flares up in the Viceroy, yet he appears completely calm as he says: ‘Who do you call barbarians?’

Philon looks at him, surprised. With some derision he answers: ‘They who do not respect our gods, do not understand our art, and are not Greeks.’

Kunala looks at him quietly and waits a while. Then he says: ‘Do you not understand that you are the greatest barbarian? A barbarian is he who does not recognise the value of a human being! You acknowledge only the

value of a dying-out varna, the Hellenes, who may understand your art but nothing of the grandest thought of India: the all-encompassing Spirit, from which your art germinates! Alexander wanted to conquer a world but he ravaged a world. When he died his empire fell apart like a cracked vase. And each of the barbaric chieftains grabbed a shard and proved to be a new misfortune for the countries that they had stolen, because no one was led by a higher principle. War upon war is still breaking up parts of Alexander's empire and mankind still suffers and dies: the Greek barbarian knows no mercy, only his own glory!

Philon is bewildered. 'What is a god without power? And hence a people! We have respect for the one who wrests might, not for the one who allows it to slip away!'

'And you incite in the Taxila of the most powerful Emperor!'

'Snatched away by the barbarian Chandragupta from the Hellene, Eudemos...'

'Who had killed the beloved King Poros! My great-grandfather Chandragupta drove the hated barbarians out of this country. What is more, he won power and is thus entitled—according to you yourself—to be respected! Learn a little modesty, stranger. The Hellene envoy Deimachos of Antiochos Sotor of Syria stayed often at the court of my father, and often spoke about the Greeks who only honour heroes: Hercules, Ajax, Jason, Odysseus ... or how all these fighters may be called. Did they respect also a Socrates and a Plato, a Phidas and a Pericles? Do you know the story of Niobe? She had, ever more haughtily, placed herself above the Goddess Leto, who had given birth merely to the twins Apollo and Artemis, whereas she had gifted her spouse—who possessed a mighty empire—with seven sons and seven daughters, all equally beautiful. Therefore Niobe, in her arrogance, ridiculed the proud goddess. She is punished mercilessly by the gods and her pride is broken. According to Deimachos your god Apollo killed the seven sons, while your goddess Artemis killed the seven daughters. The haughty Niobe is the symbol of you, Hellenes! Even as the gods killed Niobe's children, so will others destroy you.' An ominous hardness spread across Kunala's face: 'You dare to preach insurgence in the empire of Ashoka just because you are a proud, self-opinionated Greek, actually a Hellene, born outside his native country. Tomorrow the arrow of Apollo will strike you, without mercy.'

‘And you are Zetes. Do you know now that the Buddha is no god, but a human being? And also that ‘weak kings’ and the sacred Maharajahs do protect their countries? And also that the Maharajah, despite the ‘honey-sweet’ peace that he commends and the pleasures he enjoys in the ‘hermetically closed-off anthapura’, does rout the arrogant Hellenes?’

Zetes flinches at his own words. Did Eumenes betray them? In Taxila they claimed that Maharajah Ashoka is Shiva, the incarnation of a god, so he knows everything that happens in his vast empire. Foolishness!

‘I have to deny, high Kumara, to have exposed this to publicity.’

‘You are cunning; on such guests we keep an eye, Zetes. You have tried to convince the Taxilans that the Punjab actually belongs to Diodotos!’

‘I do not deny this, since it is my conviction. The Greeks have the vigour and the skills!’

‘Seven of each, like Niobe! We have two: wisdom and power! So, you are working here in the interests of a foreign ruler?’

Kancha is startled for a moment. Zetes, irritated, rises up.

‘I am convinced that the power of the Mauryas will vanish in a few years, because our kings do not fear missions and mendicant monks, but they do fear armies, fierce warriors and elephants.’

‘So, I saw it correctly: An empire of peace and prosperity, without bloodshed, is not tolerated by the Hellene barbarians. I shall show you that I am in no way different from my father. Insurgents and foreign intruders, the Hellenes too, we will annihilate, if they do not in their cowardliness take flight, like your friends Kreon and Siton.’

Zetes keeps silent, astounded and aghast. How does the Kumara know all these things!

‘Take the men back to their prison and let them wait till it pleases me to sentence them.’

Kunala follows them with his eyes. In his heart there is sadness: Killing because of the delusion of a Diodotos! He, the mighty one of the West, had allowed himself to be driven by fury against these two powerless ones. Only Kancha understands her sensitive husband. Together they return over the Hathial.

‘What do I have to do, Kancha,’ he finally bursts out when they enter the rooms of the Rani.

The air is light and cool, fragrant with flowers and refined perfumes. An Arab incense-burner spreads its sweet scent. Kancha seats herself on one of the couches covered with colourful rugs of East Iran, on which dark-red flower-motifs burn against a soft-blue background. Kunala sinks wearily down on a seat covered with a tiger-skin with beautiful markings. Kancha looks absent-mindedly at the exquisite vases and bowls of the finest pottery and artfully-cut gemstone. Then she strikes the bronze gong which sounds clearly through the silent hall, and orders a servant to take some mangoes from an amethyst bowl, to be squeezed. Asa pours the juice in two silver cups. She bows, and offers the refreshing drink. Kunala takes a deep sip. He gets up and looks for a long time through the window, the outside kept small to keep out the heat and widening on the inside to let light come in. He focuses his eyes on the ever-rising mountains in the distance, which merges imperceptibly into the high massifs of Kashmir. It is amazing that people blessed with such rich and beautiful nature always tend towards strife and not to peace! Is it because of those hero-worshippers, the Hellenes? Or, is it a need of this western people for excitement and variation in their ordinary daily lives?

‘Well, Kancha ... ‘Resolve not to wage a war but to avert it and do not kill people’, is my father’s most solemn order ... and Buddha’s precept!’

‘That he can only have meant as a general principle, he never hesitated himself to direct his chakras towards those who obstructed his goals.’

‘Since then ... he has taken refuge in the Buddha.’

‘But he remained the Maharajah, therefore he has to punish, where disobedience of the laws places the people or the country in danger.’

Kunala reflects for a while. ‘So you think I have to kill.’

‘It is also,’ she continues, ‘a matter of safety for my husband. Were you to save their lives then you might give rise to suspicions in the Maharajah that you might be looking for collaboration with the Bactrians.’

He places his arms around her shoulders. ‘It is fear that makes you say that, my Kancha.’

‘No monarch knows himself to be completely safe from a strong-willed, capable son. Bindusara did not either. So, ask your father what he thinks about it.’

‘He said: ‘I do not order you to do anything, I am merely curious about what you decide.’ I will get the same response now, too. I know my father!’

‘Then act according to your own convictions. Your heart has dictated your judgement to you.’

‘That came out of self-defence, trishna ... but now comes my manas, my reasonableness, my ... compassion. Strong young men, maybe driven by the false dogmas of Diodotos, are waiting to hear their sentence. Were I to kill them, then I harm my soul. Were I to save them, then I harm my country. If I let my father decide then I am forsaking my duty. Do I decide myself, then the responsibility will be mine, and will weigh heavily upon me. I feel myself wavering too much, my Kancha, when the lives of others are at stake.’

Kanchanamala, who still feels more akin to the Brahman way of thought of her parental home than to the Buddhism of her spouse, attempts to understand him. At last she says: ‘Maybe, your judgement was too hasty. Talk again with the Hellenes, maybe your views will change.’

A messenger then comes to say that the horse-brigade which was sent after the fugitives Kreon and Siton, has caught up with them.

‘Now there are four ... whom we have to kill for the sake of revenge, for justice, practical motives, or save them out of compassion ... or because my conscience does not permit me!’



UNCERTAINTY

Discreetly, the four heavily shackled Greeks, are brought the next evening to the new auditorium of the Kumara. High lamps, shinningly polished, spread a soft yellowish light. Kunala and Kancha take their place on large seats of carved ebony, inlaid with ivory and gold embellishment. Both seats are covered with a tiger skin as a symbol of their dignity. For the four Greeks, simple seats are arranged, and their shackles are removed. Kunala has reflected for a long time about his judgement. Now that the two other Greeks have been taken prisoners as well, he has the opportunity to consider everything quietly once more. He wants to stay calm. No 'court' this time: He will speak with the Hellenes to understand them better, the way his father conducted his own administration by questioning and jurisdiction.

The Hellenes think they have seen the sun for the last time. Their sentence is about to be carried out! The heavy arrows of the Indian archers await them! To their amazement, they are taken over the Hathial to the palace of the Kumara. Their amazement grows even more when they are brought under a strong guard of soldiers to the new auditorium of the Viceroy. As always, behind Kunala stands the robust figure of Tulya,

undaunted and motionless. Large glistening brass lamps, burning at several places with aromatic oils, fill the hall with a warm flickering light. It plays upon the wide sculptured frieze, painted in strong colours that Eumenes had installed in the four walls of the hall. Four slender pillars from Chuny hold up the high roof. They are carved out of light-red stone, polished and honed to an astounding luster, reflecting a strange glow. Around them fall festoons of charming climbers with colourful flowers and birds of precious metal. At their base are couches spread out, elegantly covered with dark and bright-red carpets from Iran. Vases and bowls of gold, silver, bronze, gemstones or clay, baked in the softest of colours, are positioned in the niches. Statues of foreign origin stand on delicately cut stools.

The four men, always sensitive to art, look around, moved, as though they had expected a less beautiful ambience. Gradually, a smile appears on Philon's face.

Kunala, who has kept a sharp eye on the Hellenes, notices it. 'You smile, Philon, at this most serious moment. I understand it is your proud heart that provokes the smile.'

'Pride? We Greeks think too soberly and truthfully, O, Kumara, to allow ourselves to be led by pride,' he retorts sharply. 'It is not pride that leads us to the truth.'

'How do that sobriety and truthfulness manifest themselves? Do not sobriety and truthfulness also imply: the recognition of one's faults and the good qualities of others? Perhaps, you now understand that this is the reason why I have allowed you to be brought here once more. According to you it is only one people, the Greeks, who are superior to all the others.'

'That they are, Kumara!' Philon straightens himself.

'One of our great poets once said:

*'Enchantment of radiant beauty
Lends its voice in decisions of the council
Of the highest powers!'*

The desire for beauty is the moving spirit of the Greek people. It pushes us to the cultivation of the body, to martial arts in which beauty is exhibited at its best; to art, compared with which the art of other peoples seems foolish; to science, which makes others only childlike and imperfect. You ask, O, Kumara, why I smiled. Well... your pillars which show a faulty proportion

of length and width, bear at their top a symbol of their task: Greek capitals from Corinth, with leaves of acanthus. The friezes along the walls are of Greek workmanship. To him who knows the bas-reliefs of the temple of Athens they look however lifeless and weak. In your niches you have placed, O, Kumara, artifacts – jugs, jars and plates. I can show you immediately the Hellenic vases. That one over there is an amphora of Attica. The colour of the clay has turned out well with the red lead. The painter has made them black with lustrous paint but has left the figures unfilled, giving it with delicate black lines life and movement, adding expressiveness to the musculature and countenance. They are images of gods. This lekythos is actually a decoration for a grave, a white panel closed on top and below by black lacquer. Over the white section, soft-coloured images of gods are depicted, the dying summer, which is brought to the Olympus by winged messengers. Over there stands a cask of Sparta, a barrel of wine, with stylistic figures of Greek flanges on the neck and its base.’

All rise to their feet. Tulya follows the Kumara a pace length behind. Philon is so carried away by his enthusiasm over Greek art that all listen with great interest. He tells of his two years in Greece, especially the time he spent in Athens, feasting on such splendourous beauty that his whole life has been filled with it.

‘This figurine is a good copy of Artemis, the Athenian goddess of the hunt. It is striking, not only for its naturalness and the beauty of her form, the magnificent pleats in the chiton and breechcloth, but especially for the clear movement of all her muscles. Can you see her walk? It is so natural, as though she is alive and her grip on the arrow is so perfect in posture that only the greatest of Greek sculptors could have created such a work of art. Beauty is the living force of our people, which surges towards perfect physical development, to the flowering of art, to struggle and victory, to happiness!’

They return to their places.

‘But what beauty are you talking about, Philon? The tangible beauty? The physical beauty? Deimachos, the Hellene envoy at the court of Pataliputra, praised the Greek gods and goddesses against those of other peoples, but from the tales he told, one of the listeners concluded that they were a population of gods of adultery, incest, patricide and fratricide, avenging gods. Thus you Greeks, too, have to be. Gods are modelled on

people. Your gods are people, glorified in beauty; your veneration is a veneration of the human being himself! That is barbaric. The beauty of your forms, your art, may be higher than that of other peoples but it is barbaric. In Taxila you could have experienced what India calls beautiful if you had not been caught up in your own arrogance. Our gods are beauty itself. Our Brahman, Atman, All-spirit, is not the beauty of the human being. On the contrary, every human being of whatever sect has something of the beauty of the All-spirit within, because all life, all-spirit is an unfolding of the Atman. Our belief is founded on what every human being recognises as the good, the divine, the beautiful: the steadfast line in the jumble of this divided world, the reasonable, the compassion, the kindness in the human being. Your belief is founded on the sensuous, the physical happiness of the individual. Ours—the way the Buddha taught—wishes for the happiness of all people, all beings, and offers the possibility of realising the highest—not the netherworld, but heaven—for all. You create your objects of art for a few privileged or wealthy ones, and slave or artisan live only for their benefit, their pleasure and joy. The Buddha preaches the salvation for the whole world and his weapon is the all-encompassing compassion. At yours, one preaches life; death means a downfall into the netherworld and your weapon is blood feud and murder.'

'Zoroaster praises the battle against the evil powers!' Sithon opines.

'That means you have given the lie to your words. All four of you have preached war against the mighty Emperor, who desires not evil but compassion to be elevated in accordance with his leading principle!'

'Why then do you call upon the Hellenic art for help?' Philon asks.

'Because we value your skills but our insight is loftier than Greek ethics. You know the sculptor Eumenes: He is fascinated by the beautiful thoughts of the Buddha, by the work of the sacred Maharajah.'

'Eumenes is unfaithful to the Hellenic tribe!'

'Eumenes is more faithful to the Hellenic spirit than you are. That is, to the beauty, that carries within it the symbols of eternity, beauty which does not lie in the fleeting, transient beliefs of your transient tribe but in the teachings of the Buddha which will live eternally in a thousand tribes.'

'But when our greatest artists, O, Kumara, accomplish in their art the highest depiction of human beauty and call it God, is that not as much a symbol of eternity?' Kreon asks.

‘That is the eternal beauty in the human being, in the individual,’ Kancha reflects aloud. ‘One thinks to find the ideal of beauty in Greece, the other in Pataliputra. Both fail. But if Eumenes once knows how to create an image of the Buddha or of Brahman, as he is trying to, that expresses the serenity and compassion for all beings, the conquest of all evil, the total predominance of unalloyed good, then he has made visible the symbol of eternity, the all-encompassing beauty: that, towards which every human being, every tribe of whatever people, the Greeks too, should strive. It knows no barriers of tribe or people: **that** is the Hellenic spirit in Eumenes.’

‘And what if someone elevates the eternal evil into a symbol, high Rani?’ asks Sithon.

‘For us Buddhists the evil is an illusion, maya, because we only believe in Nirvana. The evil would be: hell. But hellish punishment is never eternal with us, so cannot be a symbol of eternity, because once penance will be done for the evil side of one’s karma, the soul returns to earth and searches again for the eternal good, Nirvana. In the depiction of the thirst for life, the will of nature, whose sole endeavour is its struggle for survival, the finite, the fleeting, so the non-eternity, will be expressed, unless it is at the same time referring to beauty as the symbol of eternity.’

Philon stares at her with wide, surprised eyes: Aspasia! His smile fades and a deep serious line furrows around his well-shaped mouth. Only then does he begin to understand a little of the art of Eumenes. In the demeanour of this beautiful young royal couple there is something that touches his susceptible heart. Is not the Kumara right with his remark: ‘A tribe of gods of adultery, blood-shame, patricides and fratricides?’ Does he not know the story of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, of his sons, who killed each other, his daughters, one of whom was interred alive, a whole family line destroyed out of revenge for Oedipus’ guiltless guilt! And what of Perseus’ fate, of Hera’s revenge on Hercules, of Pelops’ unfaithfulness to his promise and his assassination of Myrtilos, which brought calamity to the entire innocent progeny? Of the descendants of Kadmos. And so many others! The gods punish innocent descendants of sinners. Vendetta! And this young king and his beautiful queen preach compassion which, hearing it from her mouth, he suddenly feels as of much more importance than eternal revenge, hatred and warfare. They articulate the all-encompassing compassion and love for the human being. Is that not a more beautiful principle? More worthy for a human being! The worth of each living human

soul! Part of the All-Spirit! And he feels that their compassion will reach out even to the four who have been sentenced to death. He has been waiting for his death and has acknowledged the judgement of the Raja as just. Now something is thrown open to them that they did not recognise in the past, the worth of a human being! Suddenly, he gets up from his seat. Tulya snatches up his weapon.

Philon asks frankly, 'Does the compassion even reach the ones sentenced to death?'

'The Buddha forgives as soon as a sinner essentially changes his inner view to the direction of Buddha's path.'

'And can we sinners take refuge in the Buddha?'

'...When you can convince the Sangha that your inner vision has turned towards the Buddha, certainly.'

Philon looks at the Kumara with admiring eyes.

'I am deeply struck by what, for us, are strange views of the kings of India. But I could pretend, O, Kumara, to save my life!'

'Then you would only harm your own soul, burden your karma. Not us, who have to weigh for ourselves if your punishment is necessary for the state or whether because of the Buddha we allow compassion to prevail. Taxila, as you experienced, scoffs at your rather foolish attempts, which only brought unrest. Shall I send my purohita tomorrow?'

'With pleasure, high Kumara and magnanimous Rani!'

Kunala summons the guards. The Greeks bow to the Kumara and his Rani reverently. They are then led to the old palace over the Tamra Nala, for better accommodation.

'Well, Kancha,' Kunala sighs.

'My beloved Raja wanted to save their lives. Your inner conviction is that of the sensitive Buddhist.'

For a long time Kunala thinks about his verdict and his act of mercy. After a few weeks the Greeks are allowed to move freely in Taxila. However, Kunala had made sure that they are closely watched. Faith in his decision grows, as none of the four proves unworthy of clemency. Often, their road leads to Eumenes, they even become upasakas of the Sangha. They visit the Kumara several times, who always receives them kindly, usually together with Kancha. And they eventually come to a mutual

appreciation, so that Kunala entrusts to them the supervision of the architectural and construction work. In the amalgam of the two cultures, the Indian from the East and the Hellenic from the West, blossoms an unusual art that would characterise Gandhara for ages to come.

The only one who is not reconciling himself to this Indian world is Sithon. He is a Bactrian, a follower of Zoroaster. One day he goes to the Kumara and asks for permission to return to Bactria. Kancha is surprised.

‘So, you do not feel at home in your work,’ she declares as fact.

‘No, O, Rani.’

‘More with the desires of Diodotos?’ smiles Kunala. Sithon flushes.

‘Most likely you will disapprove of me, O, Kumara. I am a serious follower of Zoroaster and I recognise now that we should not consider the Indian kings as followers of Ahrimon. That charge was only a way of Diodotos, to incite us against you. I acknowledge: you are wholly followers of Ormuzd. When I am allowed to return to Bactria, I will make that clear to Diodotos, Orekles and Aristes.’

‘Why did you not become a follower of the Buddha, Sithon?’

‘...Because as a follower of Zoroaster’s teachings, I believe not only in good but also as much in evil. There can only be harmony if one follows the good but recognises and fights the evil.’

‘Thus strive towards Nirvana,’ Kancha says.

‘No, high Rani, we see the evil as a necessity without which the good relinquishes its reason for existence: Nirvana is the all-good, which annihilates even the good. Zoroaster considers work to be the most sacred duty.’

‘Then go back to your country and proclaim the teachings of Zoroaster,’ Kunala decides. ‘The question is not to which sect you are devoted but that you take seriously whatever is revealed as beautiful in your sect. Then you live so accordingly.’

‘Then no true Yavana will ever fight Emperor Ashoka,’ smiles Kancha.

Sithon bows. The following day he leaves for Bactria. Kunala sighs deeply.

‘Well, my husband?’

‘I envy this Hellene, who dares to face the consequences of his thoughts even though it leads to a clash with Diodotos.’

‘Every true human being accepts the consequences of his inner conviction. So do you, too!’

‘What I feel, Kancha, is that my veneration of my father makes his every desire a command for me, although I do not fully agree with him in my views, neither in his expectations from his peoples.’

‘The way he views it ... The great wisdom of the Maharajah certainly does not demand of the Yuvaraja the obedience of a slave but a free unfolding of his being, your independence. Follow your views according to your inner conviction.’

‘Maybe, I am not the wished-for Yuvaraja.’

‘Then he has to choose someone else, rather than imposing his will on someone who does not share his conviction!’

‘But that is exactly the problem, Kancha. He does not impose his will! He does not demand, he wishes that I should continue to govern in harmony with his spirit. No one knows how unselfish his aspiration is. That surrender to his magnificent task and its exquisite results is precisely what makes me doubt the correctness of my own views. Therefore, I can only act as he desires.’

‘Then return, like Sithon, to your native soil.’

‘That, too, I cannot do. My father desires to see me on the ivory throne. I do not know, Kancha, whether I acted right to grant mercy to the four Yavanas, to send the imprisoned Taxilans to the salt-mines instead of having them executed. I am always in doubt. There is one who can support me if I, in my wavering, hesitate in my choice. That is you.’

‘Therefore, I left Tirha and the Bhagavati, my beloved!’

Life in Taxila takes on its course again. The caravans that had been held up once again move on to far-off countries. Others enter, loaded and covered with dust from far countries, to the busy trade city. Kunala maintains strict order. His army makes regular training expeditions, sometimes at a far distance from Taxila. After the revolt one would have expected Ashoka to send out a strong army. But only a few messages are coming in from the capital and those are of small importance. On his report about the taking of the town, the death sentence, and mercy for the insurgents, no reply has come. It unnerves the young Raja. Could it be that his father is not content with the measures that he takes? Then there comes up a new case: Aria, a region south of Bactria; spies have sent reports that the troops of Diodotos

have occupied a part of the country in the north. And Aria is part of the jurisdiction of Aryavarta¹! It has accepted the supreme rule of Ashoka just like Arachosia and Gedrosia, more to the south, have done. Aria fears Diodotos. That is why it has placed itself under the rule of the mightiest ruler of the world, whose protection is like the shade of the sacred banyan for the caravan. To defend it is impossible so it asks for help from the Kumara. Kunala sees this as a new test. Ashoka does not want a war! So, he has to try to settle it amicably, but Diodotos relies upon Ashoka's love for peace, and insolently thinks of annexing part of the far-away Aria to his kingdom. There is only one position fitting enough to take, the very one his father has refused: immediately attack Bactria with a strong army! He would straightaway set out to do it, if he did not feel bound by his father's view!

'Of course, my father sees the solution in sending a delegation to Diodotos. Or, would Father not consider that far-away country, hidden between the foothills of the Hindukush, to be of any importance?'

'Maharajah Ashoka is a faithful Lord and will certainly protect Aria, but is the peaceful way of appeasement so foolish?'

'Diodotos and a peaceful way... If we do not bare our teeth he will certainly retain the occupied part of Aria or take all!'

'Threaten him!'

'That will not work! One who incites in Taxila and attacks Aria is not interested in reason or rights. I will march with my army to Kabura². From there is a road leading to Antacogna, the capital of Aria.'

'With the elephants?'

'Of course! That induces dread in him. If that does not work ...' Suddenly Kunala pauses and kept silent.

'A war?' Kancha asks with a heavy heart.

'Yes ...'

For some time Kancha silently looks over the plains of Taxila towards the white mountain ridges of the Himalayas. 'How much easier it was for the Wild Prince to act! My husband feels himself bound by the teachings of the Buddha and his father's view. Look yonder ... the Meru! There resides Shiva ... Ashoka himself! His decision mattered and still does matter as a decision of the gods.'

'The Wild Prince had to give way to Sumana.'

‘To acquire a new territory where he could also govern freely. You know what I fear all the time?’

‘Tishya Rakshita,’ Kunala says with a laugh. ‘The new Agramahisi!’

She nods. ‘She has reached the peak of her power. What is her influence?’

‘A naught! My father knows her.’

‘She is beautiful. Her laugh is dangerous even for Maharajah Ashoka!’

‘My succession to the throne is certain, even if I wage a war against the Yavana of Zariaspa³. I will protect Aria. That is just! Maybe, Diodotos chooses the way of the jackal and will start howling in the woods of Bactria.’

‘But that means the chance of a war! How long will that campaign take?’

‘Months! It is a difficult road for an army.’

‘Is it not too risky?’

‘No, I still have other arrows in my Indian quiver!’

With great energy, Kunala begins his preparations. Thousands of road-layers are sent to Kabura to prepare the roads to Aria and arrange depots for the feeding of the army. Huge detachments of the feared Indian archers and battle-carts are going ahead to occupy the most important points from the Khyber Pass onto Kabura. Then the elephants, heavily armoured, depart. The night before the departure of the main body, after Kunala has organised everything, he sits quietly with Kancha.

‘Let me come along to Aria!’

Kunala reflects for a while. ‘No, I cannot expose you to the fatigues of a military expedition. Moreover, my interests here need to be protected, as well as a link with Pataliputra. My ministers have to consult with my Queen about every decision because she is wise and good.’

Kancha smiles sadly. She, alone in the great palace!

‘Take care of your own safety, too, my beloved!’

‘Ask Surya to give me light and strength on my path!’

Filled with pride, she sees Kunala off, departing at the head of the large cavalry. For a long time she gazes after him and keeps the image of his strong, limber figure before her eyes, his youthful face with its beautiful smile turned towards her. When she comes back riding on Vida, the huge crowd that has been watching Kunala’s departure cheers for her.

For many long months she waits for Kunala's return. Continuously she receives messages about his expedition through the high mountainous country of the Hindukush. In Kabura, he sends a delegation to Bactria, which will negotiate in a conciliatory atmosphere with Diodotos, and request him to withdraw his troops from Aria. A latter message informs her that the army of elephants will temporarily remain in the plains before Kohi Baba, while Kunala together with the horse brigade, the archers and the battle-carts, will march onwards over the Khyber Pass between the Hindukush and Kohi Baba to the valley of the Arius, and advance from there into Aria. While Diodotos remains adamantly against friendly mediation, he feels threatened not only by Kunala's enormous army but also by the alliance of Antiochos. Diodotos realises what that means: Kunala wants to help Antiochos to reconquer Bactria, Margiana and Sogdania! It comes to a serious clash between Kunala's advance guard and the Bactrian troops in Aria: A war? When Diodotos recognises, however, the seriousness of Kunala's plans, and he invades Aria with a mighty elephant-army still waiting before the Kohi Baba to invade Bactria, the king suddenly has a change of heart towards Ashoka and orders the withdrawal of his troops from Aria. Some weeks later, there is a joyous celebration of victory at the entry of Kunala into Antacogna, the capital. Then the Kumara returns, but only after he has ordered the swift departure of the elephant-brigade to Taxila.

The waters of the Indus have begun to rise by the time Kunala arrives again in the Punjab. Kancha hurries towards her spouse a few yojanas ahead and the reunion, for both of them, is pure joy.

'Is there news from Pataliputra?'

'Not yet.'

'Not yet!' It makes him feel dispirited. 'What makes my father remain silent like this?' It is not easy to understand why there has not been a word of either approval or disapproval. In the end, Kunala is convinced that his father's silence can only be explained by disappointment at his decisions. Is Kancha right when she expresses fear that they may have informed the holy Maharajah in such a manner that his suspicion is aroused? Or, ... the demon! He thought his father and he were bonded together. Can a woman like Tishya Rakshita come between them? No! That is impossible. Could Tishya Rakshita have accused him of the incident in the stone wing? And would his father then believe her? And has not his father welcomed him

everywhere, because he, Kunala, will one day be his successor? And would he then keep silent out of anger or dissatisfaction? Kancha sees how her husband, for long periods of time, is caught up in his thoughts. She herself is worried, yet remains filled with hope that the Maharajah only wants to lead his son to independence. Did he not send him therefore to Tirha? Those days in Tirha! When no Tishya Rakshita was yet disturbing her thoughts and Katcha hardly aroused any worry in her, when Kunala and she grew in their deep love, carefree and happy.

Kunala sends a long report of the events to Pataliputra with the urgent plea to receive, at last, a judgement about his work. Again, months pass by, again lipis appear from the capital but they concern general matters. There is not a single personal word from his father for the Yuvaraja! The more time steals by, the more the Kumara turns inwards. Where, at first, he had the feeling that he had acted correctly, both in the hard decisions and the many smaller ones, now slowly uncertainty is creeping in. Had he been too indulgent in his forgiveness towards the Yavanas and the traitors of Taxila, too war-minded in his battle against the king of Bactria? He himself is convinced that he could not—and should not—have acted otherwise. But then there could be a fundamental difference between their views.

When the pressure has grown too strong, he takes up his veena. He plays and sings and the gloomy thoughts go away. And Kancha, who notices that Kunala is being increasingly weighed down under the silence of Pataliputra, listens with heartfelt emotion to his playing and singing, the melancholy of which she can hardly bear. Then she makes it clear to him that the Maharajah would not have kept silent if he were dissatisfied with his governance. Rather, his silence means a sign of agreement!

‘Father never kept away his opinions about my views, Kancha!’

‘But now you are an independent Kumara, and he does not want to influence you anymore. And the Maharajah knows that you have your faults just like he has his!’

‘I asked with urgency, Kancha. He knows my wavering!’

‘Exactly because he knows! Moreover he had to endure the loss of Asandhimitra and there was the choice of a new Agramahisi. Maybe, he is happy that the West is in such good hands.’

Kunala’s eyes light up. Kancha possesses sharp judgement and usually sees things right. For a while everything goes well. In Aria peace has

returned and a delegation comes with precious carpets, golden and metal artefacts and precious stones, to express the gratitude of the threatened country that once again feels safe from the Yavanas of Bactria. In Taxila there grows a cordial relationship between Kunala and the inhabitants. But the question that heavily weighs down upon him lingers: what could be the reason for the mysterious silence of Pataliputra?



THE ASSIGNATION

A rumour spreads through the streets of Pataliputra: ‘The holy Maharajah!’ The people do not dare to further speak out aloud the frightening thought; it is written on all their faces. They hurry along the King’s road, their fright, palpable in their movements. In the streets of the potters, smiths, ivory-carvers, goldsmiths, leather workers, cart-makers and the traders, the workers, stop their steady work as someone approaches from the city’s centre. The interested public gathers in front of the park gate and their eyes follow those who move towards the palace. They anxiously wait for those who return. No one is loud nor do they ask directly but the question is in their eyes. All hubbub fades from the streets ... the holy Maharajah! They are afraid of compounding their guilt, of falling short in their reverence. The gods should not have any reason for punishment or reprisal! They tremble at the thought of retribution befalling the holy Maharajah! No more sinning! Sleep is now a welcome reprieve! It is as though the entire population is bearing the life of the holy Maharajah. They will do anything that will pacify the gods. Despite the years of Buddhism this is how they still feel. Nonetheless, they also bring flowers and wreaths to the Ashokarama. They give more alms to the monks, so that they will pray more devoutly and purify their lives of sin. The more purified the people, the more pleased the gods; and the more their pleasure, the more

will they grant boons. Purity, goodness and reverence are like prayers for the Maharajah! Life in the city has become like one great offering that spreads throughout the land.

In the palace, meanwhile, tension grows. For weeks the Maharajah has suffered his illness without complaining until the disturbing fact becomes too apparent. They urge him to take medical treatment but Ashoka refuses, trusting as always his own natural capacity for recovery.

There is one who feels, though, that the Maharajah's impending death is a powerful threat: the Agramahisi. It will strike like a thunderstorm, an earthquake or the flooding of the Ganga, over a whole population, but it will destroy her, because it will push her back to the obscurity of the forgotten Rani! Just when her deepest desire has been fulfilled! For weeks she has watched in fear how the Maharajah's health waned, how his power and energy ebbed, until everyone around her understood that a danger threatened India. That Ashoka is a constant source of happiness for his subjects leaves her cold. She feels nothing for these peoples, all are strangers to her, kneeling down as she, the Agramahisi, together with her spouse, ride on the high back of the royal elephant. But Ashoka's life is her life, his death her death, because she then will be at the mercy of that coward of Taxila and the self-confident Brahmin woman from the hermitage in the woods. That woman will become the Agramahisi and she, Tishiya Rakshita, will no longer be the Maharajah's Rani, no longer queen-mother. She will become nothing but a despised woman. Such is definitely not what she wants. The old Maharajah must stay alive for her, because she will not yield! Even Ashoka himself becomes worried. He is aware that his condition causes her worry, and that thought moves him.

'My Lord, you have weakened, and you walk as though each step is heavy: They say you hardly eat anymore! Lord, allow the physicians to come!' Out of fear she falls to her knees and raises her hands to her forehead.

'Why are you so worried, Tishya? My body is still strong. I wish not to be locked away by physicians in my sleeping chambers!'

'Lord, it is much worse than you think! You yourself have had great gardens planted all over the empire, full of medicinal herbs to cure man and beast. And you yourself are not using them!' Tishya's whole being expresses her uncontrollable fear. Seeing this brings the Maharajah joy, and he smiles.

‘Do not worry, Tishya.’

‘Not worry?’ She bursts out in tears. ‘I am desperate with worry! I have lost Asandhi! I do not wish to lose you as well, Lord, or I will have to join you in death!’

Ashoka raises her up and seats himself beside her, exhausted.

‘Listen, Tishya. I am getting older. My death will no longer be a tragedy ...’

‘No tragedy? Lord, if you die, I wish to die with you! What will become of me when I will no longer have you and Asandhi!’

The Agramahisi is so agitated that Ashoka, deeply moved, puts his arms around her shoulders to calm her down. Her concern lifts his spirit; since Kunala left he has been feeling abandoned and lonely.

‘Alright, Tishya, if I am not better tomorrow, I will allow the court’s chief physician to come.’

‘Oh, that makes me happy, Lord! The physicians will save you!’

The next morning she is with him early. Ashoka is more ill than ever.

‘You see!’ Tears well up in her beautiful eyes. ‘So, now you rest, Lord, until the doctors decide otherwise. I, the Agramahisi, will stay awake and by your side, so that you will do nothing unwise!’ She helps the Maharajah to a comfortable position; she then hurries out of the door to send for the court’s chief physician. Her bustling to ease his suffering does the Emperor good. She takes care of him, reads his face for signs of thirst or discomfort or of worries about work. She understands what hurts him and gives advice.

The physician, Vakkula, carefully examines the Maharajah but cannot get to the cause of the illness. The Maharajah is told to take a rest, as his fever is very high. The physician gives him some calming medicines. When Ashoka tries to get up, it is apparent that he is barely able. Tishya is alarmed. She urges him to consult the other physicians as well. Ashoka agrees but sends, too, for his Prime Minister. When Radhagupta enters, Tishya makes a move to leave the room.

‘Stay, Tishya,’ the patient weakly gestures. He gives a brief order that Radhagupta is to take over all pending government matters. ‘Send word to Kunala that I approve of all of his measures in the West. He strongly urges me to give my opinion of his governing ... He must act independently, according to his own insight. My illness has restricted me in my work so that I repeatedly postponed my answer to him. Tell him now.’

Tishya approaches the bed. 'Forgive me, Lord, but postpone for now the message to the Yuvaraja. Why worry him! Wait until you are well again.'

Ashoka thinks for a moment. 'Maybe you are right, Tishya. Should my illness worsen, then he will have to return to Pataliputra anyway.'

Slowly the days pass by. Radhagupta keeps the Maharajah informed about the most important of issues in the empire. But Tishya, driven by her fear, is always present, trying to keep discussions to their briefest. At night she is left tormented by disturbing dreams that awaken her. Then she hastens to her lord's sleeping chamber, where physicians are constantly present. Satyavat stands watch in an adjoining room. The Maharajah has ordered him to follow the exact instructions of the Maharani.

'How is he?' Tishya asks the court's first physician, who whispers that the Maharajah is drifting into sleep.

'Do not worry, my Rani,' whispers Ashoka weakly. 'The gods will support me now in my work. Kunala is still too inexperienced.'

Simply hearing the name makes her recoil but the Rani controls her emotion. The Maharajah should not suspect how much she hates the Yuvaraja. She kneels down next to Ashoka, takes his hand and presses it against her cheek.

'No!' she says vehemently. She then softens her voice. 'The gods may not take you from me! You shall not pass on, be torn away from your work. All of India will pray and make offerings for you!'

'Go to sleep now, you tire yourself too much. Difficulties are overcome best when there is peace in the heart.'

Tishya leaves the sleeping quarters, sobbing. The Maharajah feels happy. He had often thought that Ashandhi had not gauged her well, that it was vanity and greed that drove the young Rani. Now, he is convinced that goodness resides in her core. Asandhi, of course, had known this. Her devotion makes him glad, for herself, and for the rightness of Asandhi's loving friendship for her. It gives him peace and tranquil sleep. Yet, the fever rages and weakens him even more. Tishya's care never wavers, and to him she is like a ray of sunlight in Hemanta, awakening new life. But it appears that nothing can save the Maharajah anymore. With the greatest conscientiousness the physicians follow the illness. Tishya would often enter the chambers while they confer wearing a grave expression on their faces.

‘When, wise men, will his recovery begin?’ she asks bitterly. They all feel sorry for the Maharani. Vakkula tries to console her but they honestly do not know the cause of the illness. And the Maharajah refuses to allow a magician to come, someone who could possibly uncover the secret to his ill-health. Tishya remains glued to the sickbed, driven by her own restlessness. She takes Ashoka’s hand in hers as the Maharajah lies still.

‘Thank you, Tishya. You ease my suffering and I am happier than I can say, that you are so devoted.’

‘I only want the gods to heal my sole friend and protector, Lord!’ She is overcome by emotion and pleads: ‘Oh Lord, do not leave me!’

‘We are not asked if we wish to stay, my Tishya, only if we have faithfully fulfilled our duties. I have yet so much to do. Kunala must return!’

‘He is there yet such a short time! He is still needed there!’

‘But he has done much there already. Go to my working chamber, Tishya. On the left side of the table there is a stack of lipis, messages from the West.’

Tishya gets up eagerly, hurries to the study, and comes back to her Lord with the lipis.

‘Read them, Tishya.’

‘Lord ... I read very poorly. You read them! Or, let Radhagupta come!’

‘Have him called.’ Ashoka stifles his disappointment. Radhagupta, who remains all the time in the palace, is soon at his side. Tishya listens as Kunala’s messages are read, first announcing his measures and then continually asking for Ashoka’s approbation, and how he ultimately doubted his father’s approval of his deeds. The Maharajah is once again touched by the content of the messages. Tishya listens to the complaints of the young Raja with joy: because he awaits all the time his father’s reply, and even more, because he despairs for his father’s favour. Let that doubt thrive! He should not return and no message of his father’s illness should be sent to Taxila! That, she wants to avert! How, she does not yet know. Perhaps, the old Maharajah might want to abdicate because of his weakness. Radhagupta then tells a long story about a pradesika, who has had two Vaishyas put to death because they had stolen land by moving some border stones, which according to the old laws is land theft. The

Maharajah is ill, is he not, and could not judge himself; that is why the pradesika passed the judgement.

Enraged, Ashoka tries to heave himself up but sinks back weakly. 'No death penalty without my approval! Have him come immediately.'

'That will require an order with the secret seal, gracious Maharajah.'

'Precisely. Write out the lipi. We will seal it here.'

When Radhagupta has gone, Tishya asks, 'What is the secret seal?'

'The seal used only in cases of emergency and it means unconditional and immediate compliance to the Emperor. It prevents misuse of my name by high government officials.'

When Radhagupta returns later in the afternoon with the lipi, Ashoka approves it. He orders him to collect the secret ivory seal, along with its accessories, and asks Tishya to accompany the minister after he has told them exactly where the objects are hidden.

After he seals the lipi, Radhagupta returns everything to their proper place.

It is a dream come true for Tishya. She is now privy to the secrets of the Maharajah! She would have laughed if she were not so fearful of the danger that loomed from Taxila. How can she avert it! What if the Maharajah orders Kunala to come? Intercept the messengers? Send a counter-order? Still, this is not the most important thing. She is afraid the Maharajah will die. All will be lost then! There is but one way: the Maharajah has to recuperate!

The next day the Maharajah still does not feel better. The order that Tishya had feared is then spoken: 'I want Kunala to return.'

'Just wait a little longer, Lord!'

'Not one day! I will not recover. My work is done, and Kunala must take over.'

'Just one more day! Maybe, the sickness has reached its peak.'

'One day then because you ask for it,' comes the weary answer.

Tishya tells Vakkula that the Maharajah doubts his own recovery.

'I doubt it just as much, O, Agramahisi!

'At the very least, encourage him!'

'The Maharajah believes, and rightly so, that recovery is no longer possible.'

'And ... how long can he hold on?'

‘Perhaps a few weeks. His heart weakens. It could be over very suddenly.’

The Agramahisi goes to her room, and falls desperately onto a seat. So, her glory is coming to an end. Has she not experienced enough misery in her life? And now that she is at the height of her power! She calls Rita. She wants to speak to Katcha!

‘Rita, go to Tarata. I must speak to my friend as soon as possible. This afternoon, when the sun is at its highest.’

First, she visits the patient. She wants to try to keep the Yuvaraja far away from him! Katcha must help her!

Katcha arrives and takes her in his arms like a lover whose desire has been bottled up inside him for days. She allows it.

‘Listen, Katcha, the Maharajah is sick,’ she says desperately.

‘I know,’ he smiles.

‘You do not know everything. He will probably die within a very short time.’

‘Then you will be my bride!’ the priest cries out gleefully.

‘But Kunala will return to rule, and that will ruin my life!’

‘What can you do about that, Tishya Rakshita? Nothing! You will follow me!’

‘Sit down and tell me how I can prevent this!’

‘Have him killed by assassins,’ mocks Katcha.

‘You are not being serious. He is closely guarded!’

‘Poison, snakes, illness. There are many ways.’

‘Foolish ways! He has a wife who guards him as a tigress does her young, a guard who protects him with his life, loving subjects!’

‘Send a message from the Maharajah that he has fallen from grace. After all the Maharajah is deathly ill, is he not?’

Tishya is suddenly quiet and pensive.

‘So,’ Katcha goes on. ‘That is good advice! Now the reward!’

‘First, you help me in my desperate situation!’

‘What more do you want? Send a message to Taxila that they will put an end to his life over there because the Maharajah knows that he wants to seize the throne!’

‘You mock me, Katcha, but I must tell you something.’ And she tells him in detail about the secret seal. Katcha’s eyes gleam.

‘And you are still timid, beautiful Rani? You hold everything in your hand! King ‘Beautiful-Eyes’ is lost!’

Tishya looks at him in alarm. Beautiful-Eyes! The thought ruffles her so much that she jumps up and moves to leave for the palace. Katcha wraps his arms around her.

‘No, Rani-Morning-Sun! I am here also for myself!’

The Rani yields. She understands that she needs him and gives him the love he asks for. She smiles at him, giving him joy that is beyond all measure.

‘Come to the palace tonight. I cannot write,’ she says with her most beguiling smile.

‘The persecuted Brahmin comes to the head of the Sangha!’ he mocks.

‘I will make sure nothing happens to you, Katcha. You write the Maharajah’s lipi and together we will use the secret stamp to seal it. Disguise yourself so no one recognises you. Say you are a physician who has come at the Agramahisi’s orders.’

That evening, the unknown physician is admitted to the Agramahisi. She receives him in Ashoka’s working chambers. Satyavat is alarmed and speaks to the Maharajah about his concerns. The Maharajah, fatigued and weary, replies: ‘What the Agramahisi does, is done well, my Satyavat.’

‘No one knows the stranger, noble Maharajah!’

‘Except the Agramahisi, apparently,’ says Ashoka, in a tired voice.

Satyavat bows deeply before his Lord and withdraws.

‘I hardly recognised you, Katcha,’ the Rani whispers.

‘So it has to be. This is a daring enterprise! Do you fully realise what you are doing, my Rani?’ he asks earnestly. ‘What will you gain by it? If the Maharajah dies you cannot remain Agramahisi.’

Tishya looks at him angrily. ‘Nothing can stop me from carrying out my plan! I will not yield to someone I hate, Katcha! And you? He robbed you of what was most precious to you!’

Katcha flushes. ‘I have a much more beautiful woman instead who has shown herself to be worthy of my love.’

‘Come,’ she whispers. ‘Our hate for the Prince with the beautiful eyes waits.’

Together they compose the lipi. Katcha seals it with the secret stamp and prepares it for dispatching. Then they go to Tishya's quarters.

As a reward, Katcha sleeps that night in the arms of the most beautiful woman of India. With demonic and cunning shrewdness they decide what to do next.

‘If the Maharajah should stay alive and will hear about the lipi?’

‘He is dying but even so I would rejoice if he did not die. I cannot expect anything good from anyone except him. My smile and my care for him have crumbled his distrust.’

‘And if you are accused?’

‘Foolishness! I would swear and rightly so that I had neither written nor sealed the lipi! And no one will think of you, my Katcha!’

Katcha looks at her with doubtful eyes. Even he is surprised at this woman's hatred. For a short moment the thought comes to him that India will be robbed of a capable successor to the throne but Tishya strides forward, unperturbed on her path of hate. She notices that he does not respond to her words. Could Katcha be feeling remorse? Nothing could hurt him because there is only one who can betray him and he can be sure of that one. She ensnares him with the magical power gifted to her by nature. And a man like Katcha is unable to resist her. All his senses are centred on her love. He is like a mouse in the claws of a playful cub, and resisting would only mean hurting himself. Katcha is well aware that for his hate and all-intoxicating sensual love, he is selling his soul and bringing upon himself a dreadful karma, for which even a Brahmin must pay a terrible price. Like an enticing *apsara* from heaven, Tishya crosses his path again and again, pulling him with her smile and her love deeper into the abyss of a dark future. His soul will not be redeemed by convincing himself that Kunala is to blame, that Kancha was stolen from him! Ashoka is the Maharajah, anointed by Brahmins and idolised throughout his empire! And he, Katcha, is hurtling down the path of evil, holding hands with a demonic woman. Santanu's teachings try to slow him down; but he remains the slave of a beautiful Rani, perfectly aware of the power she has over him.

‘How do I cure the Maharajah, Katcha? The physicians have given up hope. They have inferred all sorts of symptoms but do not know the illness.’

‘Let him die, flee with me and save your soul!’

Tishya laughs. 'The priest in you awakens? How do I heal the Maharajah!'

Katcha thinks hard, but after all the excitement, sleep finally overcomes him. Tishya struggles to find an answer; she considers all possibilities, yet none of them offers a solution. She can not sleep, and her mind is active with evil.

'Listen, Katcha, would there not be others who are suffering from the same illness as the Maharajah?'

Katcha starts, 'What did you say, Tishya?' Patiently, the Rani repeats her question.

'Of course, there are, have one of them come and examine him.' Katcha falls asleep once again but Tishya dwells further on the idea.

The next morning Tishya hurries to Vakkula.

'Listen, Vakkula. Look for someone who has the same ailment as the Maharajah.'

'The physicians cannot recall a case such as this.'

'The welfare of the world depends on it! Go quickly and find another with the same affliction!'

Eventually, they find an *Ablura*¹ who is showing similar symptoms. Upon her orders the man is brought to the hospital at Pataliputra.

'Well, Vakkula. Now open up the body of this Ablura!'

Vakkula is shocked. 'He will die, O, Agramahisi!'

'What is more important, that the Maharajah recovers or that the life of the Ablura is extended? The whole country is waiting, Vakkula.'

'The Maharajah would absolutely forbid it, gracious Maharani.'

'I decide on everything regarding the Maharajah and I order you to carry out the operation. These procedures are done in Taxila so why not here? If you cannot do it, then we will try to find someone who has studied in Taxila.'

'I have done so myself, high Agramahisi.'

'Well then, then you must risk it!'

'He will die! And the Buddha forbids the taking of life!'

'Either the Maharajah or the Ablura! But you must save the Maharajah!'

Vakkula refuses.

‘You refuse?’ she shouts furiously. ‘You regard the life of the Ablura as more valuable than the welfare of India! Do you want to be the reason we lose our ruler, a ruler who has brought such peace and prosperity to our land? You will hesitate no longer! All responsibility rests with me! This is my will!’

The physicians do not dare resist any longer. They open up the Ablura’s body and examine it. Soon, they discover the cause of the man’s illness. They have the answer to their question, though the Ablura could no longer be saved.

With the newly derived knowledge, the treatment of the Maharajah becomes simpler, and the recovery process soon begins. Hope is renewed in the palace and in Pataliputra. A glow of joy spreads over the city and a cry of cheer rings through all of Magadha. When the Maharajah resumes work after many months, joy bursts into a frenzy of festivities that for several days sweeps through the population in an unstoppable tide. And to excesses, as well.

The Maharajah is especially grateful to Tishya Rakshita, whom he pampers with kindness. To priests of all sects, he showers his benevolence with a forbearing hand, as well as to the old and the poor, to anyone who needs help. But he feels called upon to purify the popular festivals! He knows, and is once again seeing, how easily man is tempted to slip into ever increasing, unrestrained pleasures. Then the old *samaja*² rituals appear again—in which the King used to offer meat and drink—with the bloody animal fights and in its wake the drunkenness and other debauchery. These traditional fights he wants to expel from his empire! Moggalana told the people how he once rose to heaven and witnessed purity and happiness there. But he also narrated how he witnessed his descent to hell and the hellish pains that came with it. He sought the origin of suffering. Through his compelling way of narrating he brought thousands to the Buddha. Ashoka wants all this to be staged before people, in spectacles with beautiful dance and music. He calls upon the artists and craftsmen of Pataliputra, to work together on the festival that he wishes to offer his people. For weeks and months, thousands of people work tirelessly for the realisation of Ashoka’s plan, uplifting the folk festival. Cart-makers, weavers, painters, sculptors, builders, smiths, jewellers, all devote their best efforts to share in the great work. It will be a joy for all and it will not, as the *samaja* did, harm the partaker’s karma but improve it.



THE LIPI

In Taxila, peace returns, and life in the busy trading city resumes its daily routine. Barely a thought is being given to the rebellion as the people once again feel accustomed to the Maurya's stable and firm hand.

Kunala is not in the right state of mind for the festivities that have been proposed. Although he governs the West with a steady hand, he is not for one moment free of the oppressive thought of his father's disapproval of his deeds. He has received no word of encouragement at all, no approbation for what he believes is his successful work. While the ministers, and the population, laud his decrees despite the heavy pressures of the occupation—and although they acknowledge the righteousness of his laws and decisions—there has been nothing but silence from Pataliputra. He continues to hold on to Kancha's opinion that there is no need for worry, and that his father merely wishes him to carry out his actions, unfettered. Eventually, however, even this thought stops giving him any solace, as his life—which in Pataliputra was so much entwined with his father's—now appears lonely and meaningless to him. He continues to execute governmental tasks with the precision befitting a Maurya, but not with the joy it would have brought him had his father given him the support that he desperately craves. Without Kancha's love and care he would not have had the heart to carry on.

‘But you are no longer the mere executor of your father’s orders, my beloved husband! You are the Viceroy, the Kumara of the far West! You yourself have to govern! You cannot expect the Maharajah to continually approve of all of the measures taken by all of his distant kumaras, rajukas, and purushas, can you?’

‘I am destined to be Maharajah, Kancha, but father still has to decide if I am worthy of succeeding him. One day, I have to take over the power, derived from the highest Power that rules the universe. How do I know what that unknown, unseen Power will ask of me! There my father has to show me the right way. I still do not have a definite will. How do I achieve that sanctity of will, Kancha, which will empower me to decide about the worldly and spiritual welfare of India? I do not know if I should have had Philon killed or not, or if war had to be waged against Diodotos. As long as I do not feel sure I am not suitable to be the Maharajah. I still have doubts about everything because my own conviction is wavering. What will promote the welfare of the peoples, and what takes them to the abyss? That is why my father must help me, Kancha. And he refuses. Even if he wishes me to be an independent governor he has to tell that to me on my entreaty.’

‘There is no one who determined his decisions with such pure humanity as you, my Kunala. I am not talking about justice alone, but justice tempered with humanity! Does not even the mightiest man have to wrest himself away from the prevailing laws? Just because they are of man’s making? Why should your decisions be of less merit than those of your father’s? Your father, too, has had to struggle with his unreasoning inclinations. Think of the lipi of Shahbazgarhi. And did he not have his struggle with Bindusara? Do you think you can take decisions that are free of all faults? Is it wrong to fail, or is it wrong not to revise one’s decisions once it has become apparent that they were wrong? Your father, who is a great Maharajah, does not expect you to be without faults, but he does expect you to correct those mistakes and gain insight from them. Why should he be the one to point them out or continually praise your good decisions?’

Kunala thinks awhile. ‘What distresses me, Kancha, is that Father used to always confer with me but now withholds all comments, though I know that he had great worries about my journey to Taxila. I know of only one reason: his dissatisfaction with my work, or with me. This paralyses me.’

‘He does not think it wise to interfere, or has no time to do so.’

Kunala looks at her with his large, dark eyes, and reflects.

‘You always give me courage again, Kancha. And yet, only my father can put to right the imbalance in my mind. I have strong misgivings that something outside of him is the cause of his strange attitude. Could it be mother Tishya Rakshita? Illness? No ... then he would surely have let me know!’

‘Wait with patience. One day the answer to this puzzle will come. You are doing your duty in such a way that the holy Maharajah can only praise!’

Then the lipi from Pataliputra arrives for the government of Taxila. The senior-most minister accepts the message. He is startled. It bears the secret seal of the Maharajah! An order for him but not for the Kumara’s eyes? He calls one of the other ministers and together they open the lipi. They look at each other and neither speaks a word. They read it again, and then again, and both fall down on a seat stricken with horror. They examine the writing and the seal very carefully, understanding nothing of this secret order that has to be carried out immediately! All the ministers are hastily called together, and the order is read to the council, where it provokes the same horror!

In the lipi, the sacred Maharajah expresses his great dissatisfaction with the Kumara’s handling of affairs. Instead of mercilessly punishing the rebels, he has granted mercy to the Yavanas, not only freeing them who had deserved death by torture but also appointing them to government posts. That is collaboration with the Maharajah’s worst enemy. Instead of threatening Diodotos with his great army, he has struck up a friendship with a rebel against the Maharajah’s best ally, Antiochos Soter. That is a threat to the state and the sacred Maharajah. The lipi then lays down Ashoka’s order: Kumara Kunala’s eyes are to be torn out. It is to be carried out immediately.

In brief, emotional words, the ministers express their frantic reactions. They knew Kunala to be a righteous and sympathetic monarch with only one goal, and that is the welfare of his territory. And then this lipi is set forth?

‘This order is based on a terrible misunderstanding!’

‘The Maharajah has been misled!’

‘Unfathomable, this punishment for his most beloved son!’

‘We cannot carry out this order without further consulting the Maharajah!’

‘But that will cost us our own lives,’ the oldest minister says.

‘Then we shall step down immediately. We will not be guilty of this most barbarous punishment for one as noble as the Kumara.’

‘We know Ashoka to be a stern, lord!’

‘But he never proved to be unreasonable.’

‘If he wishes to punish his son in such a barbaric way he can have him come to Pataliputra!’

‘The secret seal, high ministers!’ warns Sudinna.

All comments lead to nowhere but the one insurmountable fact: the secret seal. One of the ministers proposes that they vacate the governmental house at once but Sudinna advises against it in the interest of the Kumara.

‘Let the Kumara read the lipi and judge for himself!’

‘So, tell him the lipi has come?’ asks Sudinna.

‘Otherwise we will have to take him prisoner and rob him of his eyes!’

After a long pause they decide to respectfully ask the Kumara to attend the minister’s council as soon as possible.

Soon the Kumara appears, and at once he notices the sombre mood.

‘Well, Sudinna, do you have a serious announcement to make?’

Sudinna is so moved that he can not utter a word. Carefully Sandhimati informs Kunala of the lipi that has arrived.

‘Show me my father’s lipi, Sandhimati,’ says the Kumara calmly. They look at him in surprise as he reads the lipi, apparently unmoved. No one had expected such restraint. Only a Maurya could receive such a cruel judgement in this manner! Kunala once again reads the document, sent off in the last week of Karttika¹, and meticulously examines the familiar seal.

‘The seal is genuine, high ministers. You have to obey.’

The ministers stand as one.

‘We refuse, high Kumara. We wish to have nothing to do with this!’

‘I will grant you no dismissal and expect unconditional obedience to my father, the sacred Maharajah!’

‘Then you wish to undergo this judgement?’

‘Of course! I follow but one steady guideline in my life: absolute obedience to my father.’

They look at the Kumara, struck dumb. Finally Sandhimati cries: ‘Flee, high Kumara, you still have time!’

‘Where shall I flee?’

‘To Bactria!’

‘To my father’s enemy?’

‘Then to the King of Syria, Antiochos Soter!’

‘To my father’s ally?’

‘You will not be detected in our forests, Lord!’

‘I will not disappear. My father is the sacred Maharajah!’

‘Lord... Rani Kanchanamala!’ The Kumara is startled. ‘She will oppose this order furiously!’

Moved, the Kumara lowers his eyes for a while. For a brief moment the thought of her makes him waver. Then he regains his calm.

‘You are right, she will oppose furiously. But one does not oppose the order of the sacred Maharajah. No one may tell her before I have met my fate!’

‘Lord, Maharajah Ashoka cannot wish this!’ bursts out Sudinna.

‘The secret seal, honourable minister!’

‘Can no one have misused the secret seal?’

Kunala thinks for a moment. Tishya Rakshita? Foolishness! His father would never let her make use of the seal! She may be able to snare him with her tempting smile and the Maharajah may believe the evil whispers of a demon, maybe even turn his love into hate, like Tishya herself, but never would he entrust the secret seal to the Agramahisi.

‘No, that is impossible!’

‘Lord, you have a large army at your disposal!’

‘What you propose is rebellion against my father. I have been sent here to quell a revolt, not to set loose one myself. And I will not betray my father’s trust. If he wishes for my eyes then I will give them to him, just as I would offer my life if he were to demand that.’

Distraught, they fall silent. Sudinna regains his composure and speaks again: ‘However urgent the command of the holy Maharajah may be, O, Kumara, everyone has a right to ask for mercy. I ask you to send a delegation to the capital for that purpose. If it is rejected, then we will obey. Send me and two other ministers to the Emperor. We will complete the journey as soon as possible.’

Kunala smiles. ‘Mercy is never granted after an order has been given under the secret seal. So, make your preparations. I want the sentence to be

carried out before sunset on the judicial fields of the Hathial.'

Tulya, who as always has followed the Kumara into the council room, suddenly disappears. He rushes to the army camp to inform Batha, the commander of the troops of the case. He shows his imperial mandate and requests for a top division of the army to be made immediately available. With a heavily armed group of horsemen he rushes to the Hathial to prevent any harm from being inflicted on his lord.

Sudinna has the most famous surgeon of Taxila come and tells him of the order that was received from the capital. He wants the execution to be as painless as possible.

'I refuse to do executioner's work, Sudinna,' the surgeon says, outraged.

'And if I order you to?'

'Even so!'

With great difficulty Sudinna finally finds someone to carry out the horrific deed. Upon arrival at the Hathial, Kunala sees to his amazement a great military force lined up on the field. Tulya moves up towards him.

'Lord, I forbid the execution of this preposterous order! Before we left Pataliputra the Maharajah ordered me to protect the Yuvaraja always, under all circumstances, from every danger. Here is my mandate, Lord!'

Kunala reads it calmly. The lipi touches him but fails to convince him.

'The mandate does not apply in this case, Tulya.'

'Lord, I have to ward off all dangers that threaten you!'

'But you have no orders that protect me from the Maharajah.'

Tulya starts. He had not thought of that. Quickly he recovers. 'Lord, I cannot allow it! The holy Maharajah would have revoked his commission to me if this horrific judgement was indeed issued by him! I must and will protect you! The Maharajah is my highest Lord!' He turns to the front row of horsemen.

'Raise your bows!' Then to those present: 'Any one who touches the high Kumara is a dead man!'

Kunala heatedly flares up at him: 'You are my servant! Obey!'

'No, Lord, I am now the servant of the sacred Maharajah himself!'

'It is my army you have at your disposal!'

'At the order of the sacred Maharajah! Here, Lord, the proof!'

Kunala, however, is convinced that the fateful lipi is genuine. He will tolerate no opposition and thus takes a few steps ahead, commanding:

‘Lower your bows!’

‘Lord, you oppose a direct order from the Maharajah! I am the only commander of these troops!’

There is a brief hesitation amongst the horsemen. Then the bows are lowered under the stern gaze of the Maurya.

‘Twenty horsemen forward! Now take Tulya prisoner!’

‘Lord, that deplorable lipi is not the order of the Maharajah!’ wails the hunter, desperation palpable in his inflamed eyes.

‘Seize Tulya and take him to prison!’

A short but ferocious struggle ensues. Obedient to the holy Maharajah, Tulya refuses to give up, and draws a large fighting blade. But he is no equal to the superior forces. He tries to resist more fiercely. Like a mad man he lashes his great arms out in all directions while screaming: ‘This is the will of the Maharajah!’ Two horsemen drop down in the sand and a chakra strikes Tulya. Fatally wounded, he falls to the ground. Kunala kneels by him, aghast ... He had not meant for this to happen!

‘Thank you, Tulya, for your courage, your loyalty, Tulya!’

‘Lord ...’ Tulya whimpers through his last breath. ‘The order ... is false!’

‘The secret seal cannot be false, my friend!’

‘Lord, it is false! Diti ... stay with ... the Ra ...’

‘I will take care of Diti and her children, my Tulya!’

Tulya is borne away. The Kumara then orders the troops to return to the camp. Deeply touched, he turns away with tears in his eyes at the loss of his friend, a deeply loyal one. His glance, as if frozen in mourning, is directed to Surya, which has almost run its course. He raises his hands to Rohita:

‘O, Sun Goddess,
Queen of heaven and earth,
Bestower of light,
Bestower of strength,
Holy, holy art thou!’

He turns to the surgeon: ‘Do what has been ordered!’

As the stretcher carrying the grievously mutilated Raja moves forward towards the palace, the gathering crowd could no longer contain its emotion. All follow the sorrowful procession, a loud moaning rising

through the throng. As the wailing for the suffering that has been wrought upon the beloved Raja goes on, lamentations rise towards the sun, which with its fiery glow of evening-red is setting behind the woods of the Indus valley. The white monastery, high up on the hill, is bathed in a burnished glow, as if a blush of shame shrouds over the land at the miserable deed, perpetrated upon the beautiful young Kumara.

Philon and Zetes, too, had sped excitedly towards the Hathial. Their faces reflect their deep horror as they see the Kumara, great sadness visible around his dark eyes. When Tulya fights back with all his might, joy reappears on their faces. But it does not last long ... a sneering laugh of Philon.

‘Where is the compassion of the Buddha now, O, Zetes? And this ... from the Buddhist Maharajah! Hollow words! The proud lotus jerked out from her stem! Poor, handsome King of Taxila, the fate of Oedipus! He also wished for the well-being of all creatures, just as the Kumara, he had the same benevolent love for his people. Kunala, who thought his faith and that of India, was so much more humane than ours! The Hyppolythos of India! Poor, sweet Rani Kanchanamala! Doubly punished!’

‘Can you comprehend this foolish obedience of such a strong man?’ asks Zetes.

‘It is the foremost rule of the Buddhist teachings: unconditional obedience to the parents. But what kind of holiness is this from the Buddhist Emperor! His own son! Barbaric, Zetes!’

‘Let us not judge. Is it not for both, the people as well as for the Emperor, that the teachings of the Tathagata sound like a pealing gantha in the vihara, which stirs but does not penetrate their souls! The ghosts of the past haunt through the spirits, like a black cloud, obscuring the new Light.’

‘This deed of the ‘compassionate Emperor’ extinguishes the Light of the Buddha for me! What worth does such a faith have?’

‘You cannot judge the Buddha by his followers!’

Quickly the darkness rises up from the quiet trees of the Hathial towards the still glowing heavens. The slender figure of the young Rani hastens out of the palace towards the procession. A shriek of fathomless pain splinters the trembling evening air.

‘Kunala! Kunala!’ She approaches the stretcher. The servants wait.

‘What has happened?’

‘Give me your hand, Kancha. Do not be afraid, my Kancha. I lost the light from my eyes but gained the Light of the Tathagata.’

‘Your eyes!’ She reaches out to touch the bandage around his head. It is then that she realises the full reality of the truth about the rumour and falls unconscious next to the stretcher.

‘Call her servants!’ cries Kunala fearfully.

They rush towards Kanchanamala, raise her carefully and assist her into the palace. The others follow in silence. While the maidservants look after the unconscious Rani, the helpless blind one listens keenly.

When the tormented Rani comes to senses, she lets out a shriek. ‘Where is my spouse!’

‘Here, Kancha!’ He sits up, wanting to go to her in the shrouded darkness. Then he hears her weeping in bewildered desperation: The grief that he did not want to avert!

The Kumara’s hardy constitution helps him to recover quickly. After a few days the pain decreases. Everyone tries to ease his suffering and it is a consolation to him to know that his work is appreciated. In contrast, so he thinks, to his revered father.

When Kanchanamala recovers from her numbness—which struck her down for a long time—she asks to see Kunala so she can experience the full reality of what happened to her husband. She wants to know what guilt it was, that justified such a terrible punishment. She kneels down by his bed. Tears flow down her cheeks but no sound betrays her pain.

‘Tell me ...’

Kunala is sober as he narrates what happened.

‘Why did you conceal it from me?’ she asks, frozen.

‘Because then I would have lacked the courage to obey father.’

‘You were not the one who was to obey but the government of Taxila! You lost your eyes, and I lost them, too ... they were my joy!’

‘Hold back your tears, my beloved Kancha. Do not yield to the pain. I miss my eyes which merely beheld maya, but have received the unfailing eyes of wisdom, which shall take me to eternal bliss, to Nirvana. Everyone collects the fruit of his deeds in this world. What has been my karma that this fate was destined for me? I do not know, but I will not complain about that which was inevitable. What the world gives us we accept graciously, what it takes away we must regard as penance for our guilt. Life is joy, but

even more suffering; love is also suffering. I was ordained for the highest dignity in this country, but that was born in pain and suffering. Now I have gained the sovereignty of the Law that erases all sadness. Your great love has wished to support me in my highest endeavour, to be like my father. Be now my companion in my pursuit to be as the Buddha, to abandon all evil and so open up to all that is good. Help me, Kancha, to keep my thoughts pure. I miss my eyes but will gain the purification of my spirit.'

'In this way you could hail the loss of all your senses. No all-wise, all-divine spirit can have intended the senses to be destroyed! Man was given his senses to take part in life, the mind to control the impure temptations to which the senses may lead us. Thereafter we ourselves must find and establish the harmony of life. The senses are the gateways to our mind. You were not meant to destroy them! The Buddha wishes no mortification, neither surrendering to our senses; the Buddha wants the golden middle-path, which we have to pursue in complete awareness and with all our senses: this is how harmony in man is born. The Buddha retained his senses right up to his death. Why should you have to do without yours?'

Kunala remains silent for a long time. Finally he says: 'Kancha, an immense weight has been lifted off me: that of the pain of existence. A great strength was required of me, a will, a conviction, the insight and capability of the highest person in India, such as my father's. I only had the right intention, my Kancha, and that made the experience of my weakness an unbearable burden and a bitter suffering. Now burden and suffering have dropped away and I see with my inner eye, that it is right and just like this. Father has put me to the test and turned me down. He who will one day bear the responsibility of many peoples for the world, Kancha, must sense within the power of being capable of bearing that responsibility. I wish to go to my father.'

'And once again become the victim of the demon.' she replies coldly.

Kunala jumps. 'You mean ...'

'You do not think so? Can in such a great man as your father, turn an all-powerful love, suddenly to hate? Because of a few—shall we say, mistaken—measures? And they were not mistaken! Certainly not in the eyes of the Maharajah!'

'Under the influence of the ...'

‘Yes!’ Kancha does not even let him finish. ‘Did she not say that Yama would erase you from the earth?’

‘Poor father! I will tell him, that I do not feel punished.’

‘Perhaps, she will then ruin you entirely!’

‘I will give my father the choice of either receiving me or not.’

‘She may be able to forestall it!’

‘My Kancha! You judge a woman who cannot defend herself.’

‘A Demon!’ sharply and loudly she spews out the word. All of a sudden she thinks about the other woman who, like her, has been hit by disaster. Has he not thought about her? She must speak to Kunala about it. Or, must she spare him this thought for a while, as he is in a most sensitive state? Their lives and thoughts are so entwined, though, that he seems to sense her reflections.

‘How is Diti?’

‘The blow has struck hard. A widow once again! It is almost unbearable for her. Tulya was her support and love.’

Kunala remains silent for a long time. Then he says: ‘Have her come.’

Diti enters silently and kneels before the Kumara.

‘Give me your hand, Diti. Tulya’s last thoughts were for you. He wished you to stay with the Rani. He died because he was my loyal friend, Diti.’

Diti presses his hand against her forehead and sobs.

While Kunala is recovering, Sudinna, as prime minister, is given the task of governing Taxila. Important cases are discussed with the Kumara and the Rani. Kunala spends most of his time, though, with his purohita and with one of the thousand monks who had attended the great council of Pataliputra. In this way the Raja attempts to dive deeper into the teachings of the Buddha. Brahmin scholars are also invited to come for meetings, in which Kancha is always present. Then a new shock comes one day. Suddina arrives at the new palace, very excited.

‘Lord ...I received a message from Minister Radhagupta!’

Kunala shivers, and Kancha quickly puts an arm around him.

‘Read, Suddina!’ The Raja is deeply moved. ‘From when?’

‘The first week of Phalguna².’

‘That is more than three months after the previous one! Read, Sudinna!’

‘The sacred Maharajah lets his beloved son know that he has recovered from the months-long, serious illness, through the good care of the Agramahisi. Through her wisdom and that of the prime minister, the interests of the realm have been duly served. Furthermore I must report to you, high Kumara, that your Father has charged me with informing you that he expresses his high approval of all of your decisions taken as viceroy of the West. He states that they are a testimony to the just and humane insight of Your Merciful Highness. He regrets that his illness has prevented him from answering your lipi earlier. He also did not feel it to be urgently necessary as the events in the West were unfolding so well and peacefully. May Rudra protect the health of the Kumara and the high Rani, as blessing for the work that has yet to be done for the people of the Punjab. Sampadi is growing up to be a healthy young lad.

In name of the sacred Maharajah,
Radhagupta.’

Deeply touched, the three sit together, wild thoughts racing in their minds. So, the Maharajah does not know anything of the lipi in Karttika! Neither does Radhagupta know. Then who does! There is but one of the three named in the lipi, who could.

‘I must speak to Father!’ the Kumara bursts out.

‘Do you know who has the most influence in Pataliputra?’ asks Kancha, who is the first to regain her composure.

‘That influence has to be destroyed, Kancha!’

‘Destroyed! The good care of the Agramahisi: how far does that ‘good care’ go! Her ‘wisdom’! How greatly the Maharajah regards it!’

‘The Maharajah must know what has happened here, high Rani, and only the Kumara can inform him correctly.’

‘I will go back, come what may. My father will hear from me that I feel I have been freed of a heavy burden. How else could he bear what happened to me?’

Kancha could not find peace anywhere. Rebellious in thought, she wanders through the palace. In the provisions room where along the walls pots and vats filled with honey, oil and ghee and plates of fruit are neatly arranged, a woman is busy grinding rice. The woman bows to the Rani.

‘Stand up, Minda, your face is sad. What is your sorrow?’

‘Because of the suffering of you and the good Kumara. Why do you not ask the gods to restore his eyes, high Rani?’

Kancha smiles sadly. ‘Where, and how, Minda?’

‘Have you not heard of the miracle of the great Bhallar stupa, high Rani?’ Kancha looks at her enquiringly. ‘A woman, leper, went there to pray, to be healed. Dirt and mud from the rains covered the great square and the stupa. Immediately the leper set to work, to clean the holy place. When everything was gleaming in Surya’s sunlight, she picked the most beautiful flowers in the forests and fields, and scattered the blossoms all over the square and stupa, so that bhikshus and upasakas could walk the pathas in joy. From that day onwards, the sick woman was healed and her beauty restored completely. This is what the bhikshu from the monastery on the mountain told the people.’

The next day Kancha rides on Vida to the monastery on the high mountain. Upasakas fetch for the monks water from the wells at the foot of the mountain to the monastery above. Kancha, too, begins the trek. At the gate, she looks around her. Through the sharp transparent air she looks down on the vast plains of Taxila. The sharp sunlight gleams over the old and the new city, the Hathial, and in the many creeks that nourish the fertile land. Yonder ... Kunala’s mighty army. On the other side rise the high mountains of the Hymavant, their sparkling white crowns against the endlessly deep heaven.

The old abbot of the monastery welcomes Kancha with reverence. He is a holy Arhat because he has vanquished all sin in him.

‘What gives us the honour of your visit, high Rani?’

‘I seek comfort for my husband and me, honourable Arhat: Why had the Kumara to be punished like this? Do you know, as a holy Arhat, of his previous lives?’

The abbot takes her to the monastery’s court, around which the monks’ cells are located. In the middle stands a gilded statue of the Bodhisattva. A verandah lines the cells above, coloured in bright red, blue and yellow. Climbing the sculpted stairs, they reach the upper gallery and the abbot’s cell.

‘You look for consolation, high Rani, for the great suffering that has befallen a good man. Does not true comfort lie in the good man himself? In

his pursuit, his struggle with and the victory over evil, in the achievement of complete compassion through inner purity, moral strength and the triumph of self-discipline?’

‘That concerns his karma and later rebirths, honourable Arhat!’

‘You wish to know his guilt from previous lives!’ He thinks a moment. ‘Listen. In Kashi lived a king who loved to hunt in the Hymavant. Once he captured five hundred deer in a chasm between rocks. He thought: ‘If I kill them, much meat will be lost.’ That is why he had all the animals’ eyes put out so they could not flee. In this way, he preserved the gazelle meat for a long time. The king did penance for his bad karma by spending many years in hell and afterwards his eyes were removed in many subsequent incarnations.’

‘Kunala?’ asks Kancha, in dismay. But the Arhat replies with another question.

‘Would it give you comfort, high Rani, if what you feel as fate has its roots in the sin incurred in previous lives?’

‘No! Kunala’s spirit is full of compassion and benevolence!’

‘But are we not all part of the All-spirit and in the same way part of the unreasonable will of nature, for which we have to do penance?’

‘No, holy Arhat! The Buddha teaches that only compassion can free a person from suffering and death. How can the All-spirit then, asking our compassion, be itself so merciless to require an eye for an eye? Tales, honourable Arhat! To give a sound reason to the unreasonableness of the world! Neither you nor I understand the meaning of it! And no one will ever understand. Unless, perhaps, after death. And maybe, not even then!’

‘I have no comfort for you, high Rani, but you will find it within yourself.’

‘Can a lost eye be restored by the gods, honourable Arhat? The Bhallar stupa ...’

‘Tales, high Rani!’ replies the Arhat earnestly.

‘Did a demon impose this irrevocable suffering, your reverence?’

‘That is a question to be asked in Pataliputra, high Rani.’

Kancha climbs down from the mountain monastery and, lost in her tormenting thoughts, rides back to the city.

Kunala discusses with Kancha how they will travel to Pataliputra. To keep Tishya Rakshita unaware of their return he wishes to enter the palace

in Pataliputra unobtrusively. Suddina is asked to take care that the Raja and Rani can travel together with a well-guarded caravan to Mathura or Kausambi. From there they will then see. Sudinna is charged with the governance and Bhata with the army.



THE ARDUOUS JOURNEY

Early one morning in Phalguna a huge caravan of camels leaves the city of Taxila through the Ashoka-gate. They are laden with splendid purple fabrics, glassware from Phoenicia, art objects of gold from Saba in Arabia, and precious carpets from Iran. On three of the animals, known for their rhythmic gait, three travellers are riding dressed in spotless white garb, a blind Brahmin man and two women. One of them, through her unapproachable demeanour, restricts all approach; the other arouses feelings of compassion by her distressed features and the way she nurtures a sweet young lad. The strangers are not known to the others in the caravan; all of them are told, however, to treat with great respect the wise one with the veena and his beautiful Brahmin wife, who tends to her blind husband with such great care. An escort of horsemen under Ketu's command has joined the caravan to serve as her guard. The sarthavaha, Ketu, and a few maidservants are the only ones who know the secret of the blind man.

The Punjab shows off its spring glory, the fields conspicuous with luscious buds of fruit. Fast-paced day-time journeys alternate with quiet evenings and peaceful nights. With their songs, the morning birds awaken the travellers to every new day of travel. It seems as if all of nature calls them to joy and laughter. But the blind man, Kunala, is silent and withdrawn, his mind filled with all that has happened and all that still

awaits him. His every movement must be aided. Frozen in countenance, he allows himself to be guided along the endless roads. The tuneful horn of one of the members of the caravan tears him away from his gloomy thoughts. Even as the camels suddenly become more vigorous in their journey, so, too, does it seem his tall figure aligns more easily to the lively melody. When they have crossed all the rivers of the Land of the Five Rivers, finally reaching the desert, it looks as though a tension wraps itself around the life in the caravan. Kunala's attitude does not change, though. With pain in her heart, Kancha observes how life seems to happen outside him, and how he is withdrawing increasingly into himself. At night, when all are sitting around their tents, prattling or stirring up tales from their past or their fancy, everyone listens and feels drawn in. Only Kunala, his head stretched high as if looking over and around, stays silent, and even Kancha does not know what is going on inside him. Sometimes she would have his veena brought in and asks him to play. And he plays, his thought completely lost in the music, and men and animals listen and quiver.

One night, when Kancha suddenly awakes from a frightening dream that the desert evokes in her, she asks softly: 'Are you asleep, my friend?

'No, I am thinking how the doors of the senses close down at night so as not to injure karma.'

'Sleep,' she says bitterly. 'The tiresome journey will resume shortly.'

'What does it matter if I sleep or not? Around me there is always night but in my mind eternal Light, Kancha.'

'And what about the one who was meant to support you?'

An unsteady hand reaches out to her.

'I am no longer the Kumara ... and will not be the Maharajah, Kancha.'

'Then you did not want my advice in your darkest moments?'

'I did fear it. I knew what you would advise.'

'My advice and my love had no meaning for you.'

'I thought that it was my father's order.'

'That order was not only a decision about your life but about mine as well. The enforcement of it should not have taken place without my knowledge. Once, in the mahavana, you said that you wanted to nourish and nurture me—the mahavana flower—so that it would grow and flourish. You have only ... cut it off.'

‘For a Buddhist, obedience to Father and Mother is of most importance, and ... the Buddha, if one has chosen the path to Nirvana. If your wish is to return to Tirha, Kancha, I shall have to bear it.’

‘You told me once in the mahavana, that you needed a pillar, a woman you would love and who would love you so much, that she would become one with you, one in knowing, one in aspiration and one in will. Did you choose the right path?’

‘No, because the order of Father was false.’

‘And what if it had not been false?’

‘Yes. My faith and my love for my father knows of no other way.’

‘Then what does it mean being one in knowing and will? You could have abdicated.’

‘That was not possible.’

‘No, I will not go to Tirha ... we have a son. I shall speak to your father, who is faithful and sensible. Sleep now, Kunala.’

Once more, ridden with guilt, he reaches out with his hand. She takes hold of it. There is infinite compassion in her broken heart.

Days go by on the long, lonely distant journey. Finally they reach Kausambi: the land of spring and blossoms, of laughter and joy.

The three camels and the escort approach the Imperial Palace. At the gates they are stopped as their clothes—worn-out from the long journey—do not invoke trust. However, when Kancha orders the servants to report to Rani Karuvaki that Kanchanamala is requesting admittance, one of the gatekeepers hastily scurries, impressed by the high, royal lady. They dismount in the court-yard where Karuvaki has run to meet them.

‘Kancha, my child ... where have you travelled from?’

‘From Taxila.’

‘How you look! And the blind one in his weathered cloak?’

‘Kunala ...’

‘Kunala!’ Shocked, she approaches to embrace him. ‘What has happened! What is wrong with your eyes?’

‘Blind!’ says Kancha, when Kunala does not reply. Karuvaki looks at her in disbelief.

‘The eyes have been taken from him on the order of ...’

‘Quiet, Kancha!’ Kunala raises his hand and arrests her statement. Then he says softly: ‘You know as little as I do.’

Karuvaki bursts out in tears. 'Come,' she says, putting her arm around the helpless Raja.

A bath is prepared, and a meal, then they sit together.

'Now tell me what happened, Kancha,' asks the Rani.

'Let me tell it,' says Kunala, who then gives a bare report of the events. Karuvaki kneels down, weeping, and clasps her arms around his knees.

'Poor Kunala, poor fool!' she sobs.

'I feel neither poor nor foolish, Mother Karuvaki. Governance of the West was a nightmare for me. I could no longer perform my duties because I was convinced my father was dissatisfied with my work.'

'That is precisely the foolishness! Dissatisfied! The Maharajah was ill!'

'I know that now.'

'Who could have issued that order?' Kancha questions tightly.

Karuvaki looks at her and thinks. Then she says, 'I know but one in Pataliputra who is capable of this scheming wickedness, of carrying out her mad plans. Perhaps, I know two but the other one is out of the question. But what reason could she have for such cruelty towards the well-loved Yuvaraja!'

'She hated Kunala, even threatened him with death.'

Karuvaki's eyes open wide. 'Why?'

'She once tried to seduce him and he rejected her.'

'And the Maharajah!' cries an alarmed Karuvaki.

'He does not know. We thought it better not to speak of it.'

'I would never have spared her! In Anga, if someone fell prey to a tiger, my father did not rest till the beast had been killed; he knew it would come back.'

'She was never a temptation to me,' remarks Kunala.

'That is precisely why she is the guilty one! Those who value higher principles than hers provoke her hatred. Now I understand much more of what happened in the anthapura. I warned the Maharajah; I even refused to become Agramahisi with Tishya beside me. The Maharajah did not believe me, for Asandhi protected her.'

'And who could be the other one, mother Karuvaki?'

'Well, Kancha, it could only be Katchayana. You know of his animosity for the Yuvaraja and you and that is no small matter. He followed you to

Mathura. He was then driven back to Pataliputra.'

'Can Tishya Rakshita write and seal the lipi herself?'

'No, she reads poorly and I have never seen her write.'

'Katcha learned both from my father,' says Kancha.

'Could he be the criminal? Think of the elephants of Tirha! In Mathura he acknowledged that he was still out for revenge. But it would not have been possible without Tishya, who, while taking care of the Maharajah, cut him off from the world and ruled the palace while he was ill. She knew about Katcha because she was Asandhi's companion and kept worming her way into the Maharajah's confidence.'

'Be careful with your judgement, Mother Karuvaki!' the Yuvaraja warns.

'Anything is possible with demons! Who else would she have dared to ask for help! In the palace and the departments, no one at all!'

Kunala falls silent. Katcha and Tishya Rakshita ...

'Can Kunala enter the palace without fear? Is he safe with her?'

Karuvaki shrugs her shoulders. 'I do not know the extent of her power. But a demon always carries out evil under the guise of doing well. Now I understand her painstaking care of the Maharajah, she feared your return. That must be the reason too, why no mention of the illness was sent to Taxila, even though the Maharajah's condition was quite serious. Everyone expected him to die.'

'Your hate for Tishya makes your suspicion incautious, Mother Karuvaki.'

'No, that is not true, my son. Surprisingly, my intuition often reveals to me the puzzles of the human mind. That is because I grew up in the mahavana. I was always disgusted by this beautiful woman.'

'Can it not be a feeling of jealousy that misguides you, Mother Karuvaki? We are accusing her of a grave offence.'

'No! Then I would have been jealous of Asandhi! We all loved her very much. I even feared myself that I was being unreasonable towards Tishya. So I watched her all the time. And I was convinced that my mahavana instinct was not betraying me. I knew she hated you, but then, did not know why! I noticed she pretended towards Asandhi, the Maharajah and us. That is why I cannot foresee what kind of reception you will get in Pataliputra.'

Be very careful! Try to reach the Maharajah without being observed. I do not know how much is her influence but I suspect it is great!’

After a long deliberation they decide that Kunala, Kancha and Diti will sail to the capital in a Ganga ship. Karuvaki will arrange a suitable boat with a trustworthy helmsman and the journey will start the following morning. The mild spring air welcomes the dejected travellers with its gentle breezes; the fragrance of infinite flowers and blossoms floats through the fields and forests, over the calm, moving currents of the holy river, and showers peace upon their troubled hearts. The cadence of the regular steady strokes of the oarsmen set the rhythm for the sad, yet hopeful songs, playing through Kunala’s head. In his soul is a great compassion for his father. How will he console him? How will he tell him that his hope is gone, how to reconcile him with this fate? For years his father had believed that his government would be continued in the same lofty way as his own. Who will now be the Yuvaraja? And Tishya Rakshita ... Should he, Kunala, hate her because of what she has done to him? He cannot, does not want to, because of the Buddha, because he wants to be the Buddha’s son. But Father is a just king. Ruling is, according to the *Arthashastra*: the determining of an equitable punishment for those who break the law. The son of the Buddha can allow his compassion to be boundless, but the Maharajah cannot. That is why he must speak to his father before he learns of Tishya’s guilt. His father wishes to eliminate all brutality from judicial processes, apply mercy before penalty if mercy is possible. Will it be possible for Tishya Rakshita? Often Father puts a high official in the wrong for the simple Vaishya, even for the Shudra; the official is expected to know his duty. But how can he punish the highest woman in his empire as a criminal! How can he let her go unpunished! What suitable punishment does the Buddha have for her? Based on his compassion! No ... only if he, Kunala, does not consider the injustice to him as a tragedy for himself...

Kancha sees how the banks of the Ganga soon disappear behind them, how the helmsman avoids one sandbank after another and skilfully follows the current. Kunala sits still, deep in thought. Slowly, he gets restless. At times his head falls forward wearily, then, suddenly waking up as if from a bad dream, he straightens himself up again. At times there is a nervous movement in his limbs, then he sits once again frozen, and it looks as if his eyes behind the dark bandage are gazing into the distance.

‘My loving husband is tormented by unpleasant thoughts.’

‘It will be so difficult for Father, Kancha. The disappointment! And the judgement of Tishya Rakshita! He waged the Kalinga war and had great remorse afterwards. Let him now not pass a judgement which he would later regret. I do not want to feel my lack of vision as a calamity. I must have earned this fate as my karma, Kancha.’

‘What sin are you supposed to have committed? I know of none! You possess the sense of justice of Ashoka, his holy will. You wished to obey the greatest man of our time; you have brought to reason with great compassion and friendly benevolence the people of the West. What sin ...’

‘Perhaps, in a previous life, Kancha!’

‘According to Philon, that is priests’ babble! Does not the Buddha also say that every one can ascend to Nirvana even while in this life? What then is the function of fate? Moreover, it is not the Divine, the Atman that extinguished the glowing light of your eyes ... but the criminal mind of a demonic woman. A human can be touched by Buddha’s compassion, a demon laughs at it! Because of personal hatred, the most powerful woman robs India of its only, rightful successor ... There are no grounds on which to be compassionate with this Bhadra.¹’

Kunala seeks her hand and takes it tenderly in his.

‘Kancha, you do not mean what you say. The significance of rebirth is the existence of that one great All-soul: that every woman is the mother of every human being, every man their father. We are one large family and Tishya Rakshita is also part of it and needs our help and support.’

‘Help and support to a demon means calamity for her victims. That cannot be good! We will praise the Maharajah for whatever his duty dictates. We must now discuss how we should deal with what awaits us in Pataliputra.’

The ship glides speedily onwards along its winding course and, having long since left Pratishthana² behind, approaches Kashi. There, one night, the helmsman moors and ties the ship fast on the right bank, its bow facing the current. Surya swoops down behind the Ganga valley, leaving the empire to Chandra who rules the southern heaven, casting a bluish light over the pale city. Kancha glances silently at the holy place, where the Buddha put the ‘Wheel of Dharma’ into motion. Kunala sits quietly next to her. Now and then he touches her hand and strokes it gently, as if making sure she had not left his side. She suffers more than he does, but she wishes

to keep any reproach hidden in her silence. He should not think that she feels like a dethroned Maharani. That is not the cause of her suffering, which is only being tamed by the thought of soon being united again with her child.

‘Kashi glitters softly in Chandra’s evening light. On Shiva’s temple the golden top shines in a deep glow,’ she says.

‘But much brighter is the Light that was kindled here in Kashi and which glows in the hearts of many people, Kancha.’

Kancha keeps silent. The ripples in the water whisper a strange melody against the sides of the boat. Over the lapping of the waves a heavy temple bell of Kashi is heard, ringing out the end of the day. The dark dreamy droning of a horn replies in well-known tones. The oarsmen whisper to each other their fantasies, suspicions about the blind one and his wife.

‘Get some rest now, my Kunala.’

‘I cannot sleep now that we are nearing Father’s palace. Thoughts descend on me like the rains in Varsha, and my whole being is in turmoil!’

‘Take your veena, whose lovely tones will enter your disturbed mind, and cradle it with its magical power.’

Kunala hastily takes his plaything, tunes it and kneels down. He lifts the instrument against his left shoulder, across his body. The strings then make a twang under the pressure of his sensitive fingers and with velvet strokes, the mellow, yet tender tones create a murmur through the hushed air. The oarsmen suddenly fall still and a kokila in the flowering trees along the banks answers with a sweet whistle. Just as the sparkling colours of the rainbow paint themselves against the shadows of the dark clouds, so, too, do the clear tones of the veena fall into the grey, pale-bluish silence of Vesanta’s eventide. Overcome by his deeply stirred feelings, Kunala begins to lift his voice, hesitant at first and becoming louder and more confident. Like the fragrance of budding blossoms, so permeate the sounds to the distant bank yonder, where devout pilgrims tarry, on the sacred shore of the Ganga. Their hearts quiver with the stirring ballad, his ballad, which flits over the rippling surface of this much-worshipped river, and to the city from where the Wheel rolled forth over India:

‘A pilgrim silently approaches his old father’s home

Will it still recognise the weary wanderer?

The dazzling glow of the eye fades in fierce strife

*From radiant light, to gloomy, black night;
The voice, its pure timbre of youth and bloom lost;
The listening ears adapted to strange tongues,
Forgot what once to the wavering soul gave faith
And support in anxious doubt, suffering and early anguish.
The eager mind unfolded its painful becoming,
Freed itself through hard struggle of life's thirst,
That had brought him forth and embraced him in its grip.
But in his deepest, fathomless being smouldered gently,
Unknown to the trishna of desire
A divine, eternal core, unfolded from the Highest.
In deep desire for salvation, strode on in pilgrimage
The wanderer and cherished with care the spark,
That shoots clear flames and fans them outwards
With Açvattha and Çami³, to a pure beaming light!
Sprouting from the light of the All-spirit,
Wasting away world's Will
And thirst for life, which proved to be but trivial maya
In the glowing light of Atman
Which shines eternally all over.
His mind and body in touch no more with the old stead,
Thus approaches the pilgrim his old father's home.
Will it still recognise the weary wanderer?*

The simplicity of the melody, its tender and beguiling tone of voice and veena, the dreamy singing, touches all deeply, but most of all Kancha: she alone feels the aching pain this song invokes in Kunala.

'Tirha was a beautiful period, my love,' she whispers to him, and a strange pain stabs her breast. She stands up quickly, takes his hand and leads him to the tent at the back of the boat. Before long the Yuvaraja falls asleep but the Yuvarani weeps soundlessly: 'freed himself of life's thirst', 'in touch no more with the old stead'... Kashi in the soft glow of the moon ... the Wheel of Dharma ... it pulls him forth but ... booms ... past her ...

Before Surya's Ushas open the gate, the helmsman steers his boat and follows the winding course. On the other side of the Ganga, thousands of bathing pilgrims await the appearance of the Sun-goddess, and ignore the slender ship that swiftly sails in its journey to the capital.

When one afternoon it arrives in the port of Pataliputra, Kancha sends Diti to Satyavat with the request to come to the Ganga as soon as possible. Satyavat and Rohini are sitting by their lotus pond when they see Diti approach. Overjoyed, they run to greet her but struck by her downcast bearing, they hesitate and draw back.

'Tulya ... Diti?'

'Dead ...'

'Dead!'

'Satyavat, go to the port at once. The Yuvaraja and the Rani have arrived in a Ganga ship and wish to speak to you.'

'Diti, what is it?'

'Satyavat, go. And keep quiet!'

Satyavat dashes to the port where Kanchanamala awaits him. He drops down before her and bows deeply to the floor.

'You here, high Rani?'

She leads him. 'There is my Raja.'

'Stand up, Satyavat, I am ... blind,' he says softly. 'Sit down, Satyavat. I will tell you what happened in Taxila.'

Deeply stirred, Satyavat listens to Kanchanamala's sad story, which she tells calmly and with restraint.

'Help us, Satyavat. We do not know the extent of the Agramahisi's power. Can we reach the Maharajah without being seen?'

'Alas, I do not know. The Agramahisi keeps away all those who do not please her ... for the benefit of the Maharajah.'

'Do you know Katchayana?'

'No, but he is a priest and is under sharp observation by the secret police.'

'Has he been in the palace? Maharani Karuvaki suspects that mother Tishya Rakshita has had help from a lipikara but none of Father's government officials would have allowed themselves to commit such a vile deed. She thinks only Katcha would have been so persuaded to aid her. Do you know the physicians that visited the Maharajah?'

‘All but one. He was received by the Agramahisi herself.’

‘Who was it?’

‘A stranger. During one night in Kartika; he stayed the entire night.’

‘After he had examined the Maharajah?’

‘No, he never went to the Maharajah.’

‘And he stayed for an entire night?’

‘The Agramahisi received him in the Maharajah’s working chamber for consultation about the illness.’

‘In the working chamber!’ bursts out the Yuvaraja. ‘Did she know about the secret seal of the Maharajah, Satyavat?’

‘I do not know, high Yuvaraja, but she was the confidante of the Maharajah, passing on his orders.’

For a long time a heavy silence reigns in the tent.

‘How do we get to the Maharajah without being noticed?’ asks Kancha. ‘Can you announce our presence?’

‘Certainly I can do that, high Rani, but our Lord will not believe me. And if he were to believe it, he will die of fright.’

‘Let us go to the palace without delay,’ says the Yuvaraja.

‘Perhaps, it is better to prepare him,’ thinks Kancha. She continues after a short silence: ‘Your father took much pleasure in your singing. Can you hide us close to his working chamber, Satyavat?’ Satyavat thinks for a moment.

‘You are not safe from the Agramahisi’s sharp eyes in any of the rooms ... but the warehouse where the royal carriages are kept is close by and can be reached without being noticed, through the park. The Maharajah can always be found in his working chamber in the evening, as the Yuvaraja knows well.’

‘Good, Satyavat, we will hide there. And we will draw the Maharajah’s attention by Kunala’s playing and singing so that Father can but suspect one thing, that Kunala himself is here. Then the shock will be less great.’

When Surya sinks down in the west, the Raja and Rani are brought in two palanquins to the carriage shed. Then Satyavat stumbles back home. Rohini attends to the three travellers with great tenderness. A trusted sentry-maiden is stationed by the door of the shed, allowing no one to enter.

Ashoka enters his working chamber. Satyavat, as always, is in the audience hall where messengers ask for his permission to be admitted to the

Maharajah.

The Emperor peruses a number of lipis that have come from various departments. Pondering, he looks out through the window at the park, where the luxuriant flowers of Vesanta captivate his eye. So blooms his great empire, too: one great Spring-empire, he admits to himself with pride. How will all this continue? He smiles, feeling happy that he has brought peace to his empire so that all can enjoy such overwhelming beauty. Kunala and Kancha, too. Because of his physical weakness, he suddenly feels a stronger longing for his son, also more remorse for his own neglect of him. Now all will be well again and he looks forward with impatience for a message he has long been waiting for. He knew: it would be an endorsement of his view, that the Yuvaraja settled the unrest out in the West so capably. And yet, a certain restlessness occupied him, beginning from the day Kunala left. But surely, he can trust on his strong army and Tulya! Ashoka continues his work. Suddenly the playing of a veena is heard. It moves him. And then a soft song ...

‘A pilgrim silently approaches his old father’s home...

Will it still recognise the weary wanderer?’...

The Emperor starts, clutching at his pounding heart. Fever, delirium! It cannot be otherwise! His wild dreams of late have weakened his resistance. And the music goes on!

*‘The dazzling glow of the eye faded in fierce strife
From the radiant light to gloomy, dark night’...*

He must be dreaming! Oh, Gods, he is dreaming that Kunala ...

‘Satyavat! Satyavat!’ Satyavat dashes in.

‘What do you want, Lord!’ His voice is quivering with alarm.

‘Am I dreaming, Satyavat? Who is singing there? Do you hear it, too?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Then I am not dreaming! Who?’

‘I shall send someone to investigate, Lord!’

*‘The eager mind unfolded its painful becoming,
Freed itself through hard struggle of life’s thirst ...’*

Ashoka listens nervously, both hands on his pounding head. Has his illness stricken him so much that he cannot even bear memories? The voice is now silent, finally, and the veena, too. It must have been a dream, a hallucination, pure fancy playing tricks on him! He breaks out in a cold sweat and falls on to a seat. The slave enters.

‘Who is it, Dolo?’

‘A blind veena player and his wife, gracious Maharajah, have been given shelter in the carriage-shed.’

‘Strange. What does he look like?’

‘Weather-beaten, in faded clothing, Lord, as though they have arrived from a long journey.’

‘What does he want here?’

‘To speak to the holy Maharajah, Lord.’

Again, an unreal dread overcomes him as if the frightening dream will follow him and become a torture. Will Kunala now appear in the dream? And Kancha? As artists, in pauper’s garb? That unendurable uncertainty. Is this reality or a feverish delusion? Is his illness returning?

‘Bring the strangers here, Dolo!’ An eternal torment ...

Then Satyavat enters with two people, heads bowed low. Ashoka looks at them in alarm.

‘Who are you, veena-player! Tell me: are you Kunala or are you not! I want to know if I am awake or dreaming. Kancha!’ Rapidly and nervously the words fly. For the first time in his life the Emperor loses his self-control. He walks to her and embraces her wildly.

‘Kancha, is it true? Is that Kunala? Or, is it a delusion!’

‘No, my Father, I am really Kunala.’

Ashoka turns pale. He braces himself and collapses. Satyavat grabs hold of him, lowers him down onto a bench and orders Dolo to fetch water. Kancha helps him but Kunala stands motionless; he can only guess what is happening. When the Maharajah recovers he gets up and staggers over to the blind one.

‘Are you blind, my son?’ He holds himself back with all his might. He puts his arms around his son, strokes his hand, the beloved face, as if to know for certain that it is his son indeed and not an apparition that stands before him. The harrowing pain overpowers him again, when he sees the truth. Finally, he breaks down and weeps.

‘Kancha, tell me. What does this mean?’

‘Sit down, my Father, I will tell you everything, however difficult it is for me.’ And while Ashoka cradles Kunala, clasped in his arms, Kancha gives an account of the horrifying events that led to the Raja’s blindness. Ashoka is immensely agitated but strives to curb his emotions.

‘Who sent that lipi, Kancha?’ he asks tightly.

‘You must know that, my Father, as one whose secret seal has been used. Here is the lipi.’

Ashoka snatches at it angrily. ‘I do not recognise this writing. Radhagupta is my most loyal friend; he is no less devoted to Kunala and she can barely read or write.’

‘Then she must have had help,’ remarks Kancha icily.

Shocked, Ashoka looks at her. ‘Then you think that ...’

‘As far as we know, there is no other possibility.’

‘Who wrote it then?’

‘Her friend.’

‘Her friend!’

‘A strange physician.’

‘Kancha, how do you know that!’ he asks aghast.

‘It is a guess of mother Karuvaki, Father. We visited her while on our journey. She thinks that no one in Pataliputra, apart from Katcha, is capable of such a crime.’

‘Karuvaki ...’ He reflects for a long time, recalling Tishya’s attitude in Gaya, at Tarata and during his illness. At last he says: ‘Satyavat, alert the secret service. Send Sinhi and Rita to Katcha with the message that he must come immediately to the Agramahisi and in the disguise he wore in Kartika. If he refuses then Girika’s men will take him prisoner and bring him here. They will follow on foot. Tell the prime minister I am expecting him.’...

‘But what could have moved Tishya to strike Kunala like this!’

‘She feared Kunala’s return and his succession of the throne. She wanted to retain her high rank.’

Ashoka shakes his head in disbelief. ‘That cannot be it!’

‘There is another reason, my Father, which Kunala and I have kept from you. Once when he was playing and singing in the stone wing, Mother Tishya tried to seduce him into dishonour. He refused and in her rage she swore his death.’

Ashoka is startled. 'Why did you keep this from me!'

'I wanted to spare you the grief,' says the Yuvaraja softly.

'To bring on yourself the greatest sorrow!'

'Forgive me, my Father, for me it is not such a great pain. The experiences which came to me through the gateway of the eyes distressed me. I saw clearly what I felt to be my faults and I was bound by your greatness. In my soul, I became more and more convinced that it was out of my reach, that I would not be able to support the great building of your life's work, even if I would have earnestly tried to. Without the support of a mighty army, I would not be capable of maintaining peace in northern India, or to bring it to the world. To keep control over the small people of Bactrians, I already used all my armed forces. This doubt ruined my life and... your words of support did not come.'

'I was ill!' cried the Maharajah.

'I am not blaming you, my Father. It was my own weakness not to be able to bring harmony between what I saw happening around me and what was happening within me, the yearning of my spirit to realise your great ideas, with what I believed to be your judgement of my works ... That struggle was too heavy for me ... And so I was even more inclined to obey what I thought was ordered by you. Now remains for me only the eye of inner vision. And that gives me peace, my Father.'

'But I gave you complete freedom! I have also often failed in my life! Your deeds there told me that one day the harmony would grow, by nature and spirit, if that demon had not...'

'And if this gives me peace and happiness?'

'India! I have to judge as the Maharajah!'

'Is that necessity not exactly the most painful for a ruler?'

'No, because justice and righteousness is the correct foundation on which peace and happiness are built.'

'And if the ruler should fail in his judgement?'

'So, too, will he be judged by a Higher Power!'

Then Radhagupta enters. He hears of what happened in Taxila from Ashoka himself. Overcome with emotion, he sinks to his knees before Kunala.

'This is the greatest calamity to befall the country and your father, O, Yuvaraja.'



JUSTICE

Satyavat announces Katchayana's presence.
'Let Tishya Rakshita be brought in.'

There is an unusual tightness in Ashoka's bearing, as though he is bracing himself for fierce defiance. Yet, his face no longer shows any trace of emotion.

'You, Radhagupta and Kunala, will make up my Supreme court.'

'Father, I am myself the victim ...'

'Kancha, sit next to Kunala.' The Emperor ignores his son's quiet objection and proceeds. 'Dolo, place a seat for the accused, across from the Yuvaraja.'

Tishya Rakshita enters with her most captivating smile. She wants to ask: 'What do you wish, my beloved King?' just as Asandhi always did, but the smile dies with the first word. An ashen paleness spreads over her youthful face. Her willowy movements suddenly change into a sagging posture with such effect that even her beautiful gold-embroidered silk cloak loses some of its distinguished opulence. Silently, Ashoka motions for her to sit across from Kunala. A deep silence ensues and all look at the Agramahisi. Her head is spinning. No matter where she looks, intense eyes are assailing her with questions. She wants to organise her thoughts but she

cannot. She tries to defy their stares but her confidence quickly crumbles. Then she looks at the black cloth wound around Kunala's head. And for one brief moment all see a hellish pleasure glint in her dark eyes, before her sharp mind tries to rescue her and fight against all the virtuous ones who wish to laden her with guilt even before she has admitted to it.

'What does the gracious Maharajah want of me?' She thinks it unnecessary to call upon her smile this time. Ashoka stays silent, stares at her, frigid. She makes a sweeping movement, as though to shrug off all those stares. It does not help. They constrict her like the coils of a python.

Suddenly she bursts out:

'What do you want from me, Lord?' For a moment her eyes appear to search for the door, which Satyavat has blocked with three armed maiden guards.

'Is this a court I am sitting in, Lord?'

'Why do you ask that, Tishya Rakshita?'

'Because all of you look at me as though I have committed a crime.' She attempts to laugh for a moment as if such a thought is thoroughly absurd.

'Curiously, your assumption is correct. From where came that light to you! Look here. Ashoka throws the fateful lipi on the table. 'Who wrote this lipi?' Tishya takes it in her hand and reacts with innocent astonishment.

'I do not know, Lord. I read and write poorly.'

'You do not know! Let us assume you are not lying, then tell me to whom you betrayed the hiding place of the secret seal. You were the only one, other than Radhagupta, to whom the secret was entrusted.'

A fierce flush covers her face, then a pallid sallowness follows. 'To no one, Lord!'

'Who did you allow or receive in these chambers?'

'No one, Lord!'

The Emperor turns to Satyavat: 'Did the Maharani receive anyone here during my illness?'

'Yes, Lord, a ...'

'Oh yes, an outside physician! Because Vakkula and the others could not cure you, I consulted him.' Her voice is stronger.

'How did the outsider come here?'

'I sent for him.'

‘Through whom?’

‘Through ... Rita, Lord.’ She herself is alarmed by this admission, feeling that she has again picked a wrong line.

‘Have Rita come, Satyavat.’ He turns to Tishya once more. ‘And who was this outsider?’

‘I do not know, Lord.’

‘Odd. To receive in my working chamber someone you do not know? Who suggested that you consult him?’

‘I do not remember, O, Maharajah. Your illness confused me.’

‘We have the means to make the accused who do not wish to answer, speak, Tishya. I do not like to use them, but ...’

‘It was Tarata, Lord, the perfumer!’

‘Is that why you were so often with Tarata?’

‘No, Lord, it was to buy fragrances.’

‘Then you also know the name of this outsider!’

‘No, Lord.’

‘I do not like to involve people outside the palace in this judicial case but we shall have Tarata come. He will probably wish to avoid the rack, Tishya. How long did the stranger stay?’

‘He left the same evening, Lord.’

‘Without looking in on the patient?’

‘Yes, Lord. He did not know either what it was that afflicted you.’

Satyavat brings Rita in.

‘Satyavat, when did the unknown physician leave?’

‘The next morning, Lord.’ Ashoka fixes his stare at Tishya.

‘So, you now have lied three times, Maharani! Did the stranger stay in this room?’

‘Yes ... Lord.’

‘You hesitate, Tishya Rakshita. Rita, where did the unknown physician, who visited the Maharani in Karttika, stay that night?’

‘I do not know, Lord,’ whispers the servant, trembling.

‘Satyavat, send for the rack and its operator. We will refresh Rita’s memory a bit!’

A frisson shivers through the ones present.

‘O, Lord!’ Weeping, Rita falls to her knees.

‘Perhaps, you can remember it without the rack, Rita.’

‘In the Agramahisi’s chambers, Lord!’ she screams in mortal fear.

‘Well, Maharani, were you so well acquainted with this stranger? Perhaps, now his name will come back to you!’

‘No, Lord,’ Tishya’s voice trembles.

‘Rita, what is his name? The Maharani did mention his name, did she not! Think carefully!’

‘I was to tell Tarata the Maharani wished to speak to her friend, noble Maharajah.’

‘So, your friend, Tishya! Did you often take messages to Tarata from the Maharani, Rita?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Did you always go with your mistress to Tarata’s?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Were you there, when the Agramahisi met her friend?’

‘No, Lord. I waited until the meeting was over.’

‘Long?’

‘Sometimes, Lord.’

‘And you do not know the name of that strange friend, Tishya?’

‘No, Lord.’

‘Have the unknown physician come in, Satyavat.’

Tishya keeps her eyes on the doorway, tense and nervous. When the physician enters, a barely noticeable smile flits across her features. The stranger recoils, quickly understanding the reason for the meeting: Tishya is standing before the Supreme court! The fact that they must appear together before the Maharajah tells him that it is a lost case. He glances at his beloved. She smiles back.

‘Take your oath before the Supreme Court and promise you will tell the truth. You know what the oath implies?’

‘Yes, noble Maharajah.’ The physician takes the oath.

‘Do you know the Maharani, Tishya Rakshita?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘She is your friend and you have even spent a night in her chambers.’

If the Maharajah already knows this then he does not have to answer. He remains silent.

‘What is your name?’

‘I am the physician, Janaka.’

‘And before you became a physician, Janaka?’ The physician does not reply.

‘Have the disguise taken off, Satyavat.’

‘So, Katcha, in this form you are more familiar to us. You are a priest, under surveillance even. You met the Maharani several times at Tarata’s, did you not?’

Denial would be foolish, Katcha thinks. After all, Tarata will confess everything when on the rack! ‘Yes, Lord.’

‘She was able to confer with you there. Why then did you also meet the Maharani in this chamber? I demand a forthright reply. Perhaps, by doing so you can prevent my calling for the rack.’

Katcha assumes a proud stance, just as he had in Mathura.

‘She was in great fear for your failing health and asked my advice.’

‘About what?’

‘I do not like to say, O, Maharajah.’

‘Do you recognise this lipi? And the seal?’

Katcha realises that denial would be to no avail. Save Tishya!

‘Yes, Lord, I wrote and sealed it.’

Shock and rage overwhelm Tishya. All is now lost! Now the Maharajah knows that she betrayed the secret hiding place of the seal and further denial would only be futile. In her rage she loses all self-control and flares up: ‘I convinced him to write the lipi for me and seal it. He objected at first, wanted me no longer to foster feelings of revenge!’

She then realises she had allowed herself, as always, to be carried away by her temper.

The Maharajah seizes the moment: ‘Feelings of revenge, you say, Maharani! What did you have to avenge on someone who only has the welfare of all people in mind?’

Tishya flinches. Then she stands up straight and points to the blind one. ‘The Yuvaraja once tried to seduce me, Lord, when I was listening to his playing and singing!’

‘Is that true, Yuvaraja?’

‘No, noble Maharajah,’ the blind one whispers.

‘You have often lied to me, Tishya Rakshita, even several times in this one sitting. My son has never spoken untruth as far as I know. I take it then that you, my Maharani, are the one who wanted to seduce my son! His refusal gave rise to your vengeance. That is why you sent the lipi to Taxila in my name, while you dissembled your love and care for me.’

The Maharajah’s words do not make the slightest impression on the Maharani. She draws herself up to her full height. Everything that gave her life meaning is gone. In her proud glance sparks her hatred for everyone around her; the old Maharajah, the foolish, blind son, who has allowed his mutilation like a sacrificial animal and whom she—it is now apparent—should have had killed, the wise Brahmin woman who will never be Agramahisi, the slave-like Radhagupta. And for Katcha, too, who felt so bound by a petty oath that he turned them both over to her old spouse! Better she die, as her father did, than undergo the deep humiliation of being sentenced to prison or to work in the mines.

‘I sent the lipi to Taxila!’ It sounds clearly, like the gloating triumphant cry of a demon.

‘Does Radhagupta or the Yuvaraja have anything else to ask?’

‘Why did Satyavat allow a stranger to enter your working chamber and the anthapura, Lord?’

‘That is my fault alone, my Radhagupta. He warned me but the Maharani had my complete confidence. I then told him that whatever the Agaramahisi was doing was being done well. I do not believe there remain any clouded issues in this case. Both criminals, for whom no exoneration is possible, are sentenced to death for this terrible crime perpetrated upon the Yuvaraja, the highest after the Maharajah in the house of the Mauryas, the ruling monarchy of India. Tishya Rakshita will be burnt to death by fire in the execution place before Surya has risen, which Katcha shall witness. Then Katcha will be killed by drowning in the Ganga.’

‘gracious Maharajah, my Father, I declare that I am not unhappy with this injury wrought upon me by these two. I committed an act of great omission not to have mentioned to you the events in the stone wing. I should have known that a monarch who is as good and wise as you are, would have taken a lenient stand. What I may have done in previous incarnations to have burdened down my karma so heavily, I do not know, but I wish to bear the punishment patiently and I ask mercy for Katcha,

whom I have, without wanting so, made unhappy, and for Tishya Rakshita, who so often acted out of the urge of instantaneous feelings.'

Ashoka, who has controlled his anger and vengefulness by exerting great effort, is touched by Kunala's words. Quickly, he consults whether or not mercy is possible in this case. Then he says:

'My son, high judge, I must not judge as a father, but as a Maharajah, the supreme sovereign and executor of the highest justice of my people. I have often granted mercy or reduced penalties, if the crime committed could be redeemed or if the criminal acted because of mental ignorance. Nonetheless, my duty demands I punish mercilessly if the crime was committed out of sheer evilness. There is no exoneration for that! And I would violate justice itself if I failed to pass judgement through moral weakness or misplaced compassion on demonic powers prevailing in my realm. I must therefore refuse your request for clemency.

'Have the two condemned placed in the strictest isolation in the prison, Satyavat!

When twilight has fallen, the Maharajah continues his work, receives the pratedakas and his messengers of the secret service. He then sends Kesala to Taxila, to investigate if the city is also to blame. At the same time, he must arrange its governance.

Then, alone, he walks for a long time through the moon-lit park. Fireflies float under the trees like softly glowing embers of an offering fire. In a distant temple sounds the beat of the drum of the Udukai, and the drone of a melancholic horn stretches the monotonous melody. Ashoka stares long into the quiet, silently-driven waves of the holy river and muses. Before he goes to sleep, he summons Satyavat.

'Satyavat ... first the sentence of Katchayana will be carried out, one hour earlier than Tishya Rakshita's. No one is to be present at her execution by fire other than you, the palace guards who are to take her there in a closed carriage, and the executioners in blue clothing. That is my will.'



THE FEAST OF PURIFICATION

For Ashoka, Kunala's blindness is the heaviest blow that life wrought on him. Does the blame lie in the very defencelessness of the sincere Buddhist against the slings and arrows of unreasonable and merciless life? Has he himself failed, or is Kunala's attitude an inevitable consequence of his upbringing, so that his son willingly let happen what he himself never would have accepted! The entire build-up of the transformation to Buddhism in India—did he not believe of even the whole world—seemed of such magnitude to him, that despite Asandhi's warnings, he never doubted its divine origin. And Kunala fitted into this divine plan. Is the failure one of human making? Who will be able to give him the answer? Or, is his creation able to sustain these difficulties? Dhritarashtra, King of the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*, was blind and so was the king of the Sibis. Will Kunala still be able to rule, at least until Sampadi attains maturity? The departments function most securely. Kanchanamala would be Agramahisi. This possibility stimulates the Maharajah with a renewed will to work. Kunala and Kancha both participate in all the meetings of the parishad and in the receiving of messages from the secret service. They are also present in the audience hall. Kancha has a natural interest for all government

matters and the Maharajah often confers with her. Kunala agrees with this; he does not want his father to suffer because of his fate. But his interest wanes along the way. In his eternal darkness he cannot discriminate between people, and often he does not comprehend the connection. His judgement lacks the influence of what the eye can clearly discern. Then his thoughts wander off in devout meditations. He often asks to be taken to Moggalitissa in the Ashokarama and discusses the deeper tenets of Buddhism with him. Kancha always lets him know of everything that the Maharajah deems important for the next Emperor, but she senses very well why he listens. He even goes to the camp with Ashoka, and the Maharajah tries, with untiring strength of mind, to involve him in the assessments of the war games. But Kunala pretends so poorly that even the Maharajah has doubts. Between Ashoka and Kancha develops a close relationship. He has appointed for her a large room of white marble, which gives off a wondrous lustre to the golden floral designs. Roses and carnations, of the brightest white and pink to the darkest red, along with fine lilies and orchids of light to deep-blue, are arranged in artistic vases and decorative metal jugs and replaced daily. Kancha loves the flowers and their fragrances. Just like he did in the past with Asandhimitra, he now comes to her. With Kunala he wants to discuss whether or not to intercede, dismiss a pradesika, promote a government official, build or reinforce an irrigation canal, donate to viharas or temples. In reality it is Kancha who, with undivided attention, converses and discusses with him. She, too, along with Ashoka, is the one who supervises the preparations for the Feast of Purification. On her advice, he summons Eumenes, Philon and Zetes to Pataliputra. The Greeks are received warmly by the Maharajah and he explains to them the purpose of the feast: To replace the downward-dragging *samaja*¹ by uplifting presentations, that will purify the spirits.

‘So you wish, O, Maharajah, to develop by beauty of forms, sculptures and performances, the taste of your subjects and to awaken a love for higher forms of art, such as my motherland has strived for,’ says Philon.

‘That is secondary, although it is for that reason that I invited you to come. My ambition is to awake the inner vision of my people. The development of art is not the primary goal, it is a medium in service of humanity, in the spiritual and moral edification of my peoples. I wish them to come under the ennobling influence of the exalted, which during the last few years has bloomed out of the foul swamp, in which lay sunken the three

good seeds of the human spirit: justice, tolerance and generosity. Therefore, we must try to portray Buddha's holy life, his jakatas, and the beauty of Brahmanism and other sects, so as to impress upon the people the good and the compassionate. Your art will help me. The Yuvarani is always ready to consult with you.'

The three Greeks toil from dawn till dusk to bring to view their more developed sense of art in segments of the procession. When Kancha's elephant approaches, it is Philon who hurries to her. Kancha's liberal vision had already shown great appreciation for their art in the distant West.

'Have you succeeded, Philon, in convincing our builders and artists of your views on art,' she asks, a warm, friendly smile beaming on her face.

'We are trying, O, Yuvarani. We have, for instance, made improvements in the columns of the structures.'

'Improvements?' she laughs.

'In our opinion, I mean,' amends Philon bashfully. 'We have the impression that everything here is childlike. The proportions of the body parts of the sculptures are too primitive. With us, there has evolved through experience a law of proportions. Art here is lacking in the austerity which all art demands. The tendency in India is towards the overwhelming, the fantastical and the supernatural. We prefer to complete the pillars with pedestals and an abacus with a capital. The clothing of our statues should drape in natural folds, without disturbing the natural contours of the body. Our forms have originated from life, while here they spring from fantasy.'

'But is your adaptation not needed for our art, as well?'

'Eumenes has done well in this regard.'

'That I have seen in Taxila.'

'Could you have stayed there, high Yuvarani! Over there the art is developing in many directions.'

'That will happen also without us, my Philon,' remarks Kancha with grief in her voice. 'Is it not always so, that forces struggling to higher goals, all the time are obstructed by those who like to preserve, and that ... that mysterious resistance may have a refining effect on the harmony?'

'I have thought long about the appalling event in Taxila, O, Yuvarani. The history of my own country has also known horrible events. The novel, more humane approach, often ignores what still keeps brewing in the minds of the many, for whom the new age simply passes by. Even the holy

Maharajah with his sharp insight was so absorbed in his lofty ambitions, that at a most unlucky moment, the portents of dark possibilities escaped him.'

'Who would not have failed, Philon! I myself often feel guilty. I ought to have gone along with the Prince to such an unexpected and significant meeting.'

'That is what we in our tragedies call fate, high Rani. Call it fate or coincidence, but with you there is no place for guilt. The Kumara suffered the greatest pain, you the greatest sorrow.'

A touching glance of gratefulness comes his way as she rides away. Philon is the only one who sympathises with the great disappointment of her young life! The Yuvaraja has given her leave to return to Tirha, but not a single thought of her suffering seems to cross his mind. He turns himself to the Buddha.

The day of the great feast breaks. The city is a sea of flowers. On many of the sites, tents have been put up to welcome the citizens with every kind of tasty treat. But no meat or strong drinks are served now, only cakes and refreshing juices. In the late afternoon thousands of soldiers from the army encampment pour into the city and set up road blocks along the route on which the great procession², which has gathered and starts from the palace square, will make its way. Right in front of the gateway a large platform has been erected for the Maharajah and his family, Moggalitissa, and the other arhats from the Ashokarama. The Maharajah, Kunala, Kancha and Padmavati, are all seated on elevated seats. At Kancha's request, Philon has been invited, too.

Kunala sits unmoving, while all the others lean towards the direction from where the procession will start. He waits, resigned. The Maharajah still thinks that his son will be able to rule the country, with Kancha's help.

'Look, there is the first tableau,' says the Maharajah cheerfully. 'Large ... six wheels behind the drapes. It symbolises the Tushita-heaven. The gods are looking down on earth from their heavenly dwelling, to ascertain where Vessantara will be reincarnated. Below they discover the land of Kapilavastu.'

'See, O Father, how strange and yet how beautiful, the construction of the shining heavens: the pillars with their handsome crowns, its charming

construction ... And do you see how skilfully the gods' clothing is draped? It is Philon who designed this and had it made.'

'The second float, Kunala. The slumbering queen Maya, as beautiful as Ushas, lies on a bed of flowers, in a room aglow with brilliance, in Suddhodana's palace. Beautiful Apsaras surround her bed. A small sparkling white elephant with six ivory tusks awaits and set to enter the virgin mother's body. Flowering Ashoka trees encircle the tableau with their fragrance and glorious crimson glow.'

'Have you noticed the beautiful structure of the palace, my Father, the noble figure, the beautiful dress of the sleeping Rani? The simplicity of its artistry gives it the appearance of devotion and of heavenly beauty.'

Kunala is lost in his thoughts. What Ashoka and Kancha are saying is meant for him, yet all he hears are mere sounds. He hears oxen tramping along the road and the rolling wheels of the great carriages. Just tones. Nothing but meaningless sound. But the life of the Buddha is happening before his inner eye. And in the breadth of his mind he meditates on the facts and the fantasies and suddenly it is as though Father, Kancha and the whole festivity, recedes into the distance, as though he is swept up to a higher plane, to a different reality, to the silence beyond maya, to the nothingness ...

Philon's gaze drifts away from the work of art that he has helped to create, to the three noble guests, and he listens to their utterances, whose deep painful source he understands. His feeling for the Yuvaraja recedes in the same measure as his compassion for the Maharajah grows, but the warmth of his feelings goes to the young, beautiful Rani, who has lost all.

The enactments of Buddha's life go past Kunala's sightless eyes; heavenly abodes, white elephants, upon which souls of by gone days, happy in Buddha, ride through blissful havens of gods and apsaras: a coruscation of flowers, gold and gems, one beautiful moment of enticement of *svarga*³ for everyone who looks at it. He does not notice it. This is not for him! The gates of the soul to the outer world are shut, only his hidden Self is alive.

'You see, my son, this is the purifying feast. The performance of the Vessantara-jataka is coming up.' The Maharajah describes. Kancha praises the work of the artists.

'Are you not glad, Kunala, that we saved the lives of these artists so they could carry out this noble work?' she says happily. 'Our Indian art will

gain, in the splendour of what the All-Spirit unfolded in the distant land of the Yavanas. In this way the spirit of the Buddha will spread its light wherever there are people. Philon, Zetes, Eumenes, they will refine our art, purify our feast.'

'Hush, Kancha'... She and Ashoka suddenly notice that Kunala has unconsciously adopted the *padmasana* posture⁴, his hands in the *mudra*⁵ of meditation, the body held erect. After some time he appears to awaken. He turns towards the Rani and says: 'Kancha, after much practice, I have succeeded in shutting the doors of the senses for a while. Everything fell from me, all worldly desires, all doubt concerning the path. It was as if I arrived from the dangerous mahavana into the safe jungle-hermitage. All the worldly fell away from me. That is the utmost bliss, Kancha!'

Philon sees how she looks at him, alarmed; she turns pale, and then a sudden, fervent flush passes across her emotionally touched features. Deep in her proud Brahmin-heart she feels offended. Kunala has turned away from her. Her support to him has become an illusion. Only his own salvation! Her love is scorned! Does she hate him now? Ah, no ... tearful compassion!

The Maharajah, too, looks at her, disquieted. Immediately he feels what she is experiencing, her pain. And a deep sympathy touches his heart. It is over. His son has become the son of the Buddha, just like Sanghi and Mahindra. Along with Kancha's love for Kunala, his faith in the future of India and the Mauryas also dies.

The procession moves forward. Now the Maharajah and Kancha remain silent. With touched hearts, the people of Pataliputra gaze at the magical sights. In reverent silence they observe the lofty visions of the holy world of which the Maharajah speaks in his lips. In the evening, after the sun has long since set, the torches are lit and thousands of lights placed along the roads, and once again the visions roll past their eyes, and fantasy conjures up in the carefully chosen performances an enchanting reality. Ashoka, Kancha and Philon look on. For them the purifying festival is a means that will lead to the path of the Buddha. Kunala no longer wished to go along, and Ashoka did not urge him anymore. Kancha feels the harrowing disappointment of the old Maharajah, whose features express unmistakable exhaustion, despite the glow of his noble wisdom.

Some days later Ashoka asks the Yuvarani to accompany him on a boat ride on the lotus pond in the park. The oarsmen softly row the vessel over

the still surface. They sit on the high bench in the rear. The luxuriant plants of the well-tended park stand quietly around the banks of the pond, as if they wish to lovingly embrace the two broken people, between whom has grown a mutual trust that is so pure and genuine that it is a consolation to both in their great pain. Kancha waits.

‘You see, Kancha, I still tried to save Kunala for my peoples. But it is not possible; he will not become Maharajah.’

For some moments he is unable to go on. Then he straightens his figure, now bent by the years. ‘It was always a comfort to me to think that you would be Agramahisi. Now I see but one possibility to help my peoples. Or, should I say with sadness in my heart to save them, Kancha. Two grandsons are still worthy of this highest honour, Sampadi, your son and Dasaratha, Charumati’s son. I dare not decide which of the two should rule my great empire. My guru, Kullika, long ago wanted me to take the West of my Father’s empire and Sumana the East, in order to prevent a fierce fratricidal battle. I refused because I did not want to leave Magadha to Sumana. Now I believe, it would be better to divide my great empire.’

‘And the threats from outside, my Father?’

‘If the new Maharajahs possess sufficient mental fortitude! The West is most vulnerable to danger—Iran, Scythia, Bactria, even China. Sampadi exhibits the most energy; he will have to rule the West.’

‘He is still so young.’

‘But he has to go now, already, as the Viceroy to Ujjain, and prove that he is worthy of his kingdom. Or, becomes worthy of it.’ Kancha looks at him, slightly astounded. ‘Of course, he cannot go alone. But let him mature, Kancha, from within, just as I did long ago. Guide him with love, kindness and firmness. Kunala yearns for a life in Buddha, is seeking out the Ashokarama. I expect that he will soon give up his present life, to exchange it for the holy walk. Accompany Sampadi to Ujjain. Be *Uparani*⁶ there, until you feel Sampadi is capable of this great task.’

‘Father! And you?’

‘I have lost much, Kancha. Now I must also painfully relinquish you and Sampadi, separated from all, who are beloved to me, Kancha. I make no more claims for myself in this life, which does not only bring pain but also leads us to liberation, ultimate bliss. I will guide Dasaratha and prepare myself for my end. Dasaratha is sympathetic and good-hearted. Sampadi

may one day have to defend his empire. Perhaps, the peoples and the kings will grow in wisdom.'

'How will I be able to? Alone ...'

'Choose experienced ministers in Ujjain. And should you not take Philon with you! He will be of great support and comfort with his worldly wisdom and broad-mindedness, and have a great influence on the art of Malwa and Sanchi.'

Kancha weeps, and Ashoka knows why.

'You have borne the greatest sorrow of your life bravely, my Kancha. You are like Asandhi, and will find fulfilment in your noble task. Sampadi will require and appreciate your support and your wisdom.'

A year later, the Maharajah accompanies Kancha, Sampadi and Philon to Gaya. The latter two ride on horseback. Ashoka and Kancha ride the elephants. Day after day, they discussed many things and she, influenced by the great Maharajah, now regards her task as a great blessing. In her offended pride she feels she is useless in Kunala's life, and then grew closer to the Maharajah, who sought her out in his loneliness, too. So, she was inducted into the wheels of governance in Ashoka's mighty empire, and she soon understood that only a great mind such as his is capable of overseeing what powers are at work in his immense realm. She understands also how a mistake on his side, like that of Tishya Rakshita, was possible. Kunala lacks the mental fortitude of his father. The strong Ashoka would never have accepted a verdict so cruel. She has deep compassion for her husband but she feels helpless, maybe even weak-willed now, to do anything more for him, partly because Buddhism, which for him means salvation, does not fulfil her that much. To her the world she has witnessed is the stage for Shiva's cosmic dance. A slave is he who follows trishna unresisting; but he too is a slave who denies it. Freedom rests in the harmonious interweaving of both: the Shiva of Life and Shiva of Death.

The farewell weighs heavily on both. Working together with this great man was beautiful. But now she must guide Sampadi. Fortunately, Philon is coming along, the Greek who hails from the other side of the Sarasvati!

The Maharajah now turns back and the small party proceeds along the Ashoka Road towards Vidisha. Sampadi and the leader of the caravan ride ahead on horseback. Kancha has asked Philon to sit by her side on Vida, the first and largest of the elephants that Ashoka has provided for her journey to

the West. On the second, Diti rides with her young son, following her mistress to their new home. The sun is bright overhead, and an oppressive heat hangs over the Ashoka Road, hemmed in by the high trees of the mahavana. Now and then, when descending or ascending a hill, the undulating land that extends from the Vindhya as far as the Ganga and the Son, spreads before their eyes. The entrance to the jungle is blocked by the tangled masses of shrubs and climbers that criss-cross the jungle in all directions. Kancha and Philon discuss their task in Ujjain and because both are open to each other's ideas, their conversation is pleasant and lively. However, it is interrupted every now and then, because Vida is restless, unwilling, sometimes so much so that the mahout has used the hook a few times. The animal walks more quickly now than the other elephants and, as the heat increases, becomes even more restive. The mahout earnestly advises the Rani a few times to ride another animal but Kancha thinks that a bath in the next river will calm and refresh Vida. Suddenly, Vida raises his trunk high in the air and trumpets loudly. Kancha wants to dismount from the howda but the animal dashes off at a crazed shuffle, and the mahout is no longer in control. He loses his balance and tumbles off into the dust. Kancha and Philon are left to the mercy of the maddened beast. The howda lurches dangerously from side-to-side and the Rani is in danger of being thrown out. Philon reaches out a rescuing hand to her and she grabs it.

‘Allow me to hold you, high Rani!’

‘Please, my Philon!’

He wraps his muscular left arm around her, holds on tight with his right, and manages to save Kancha from a dangerous fall. Vida bolts and as if even in his madness he still knows the way, turns off onto a side road, an elephant path in the jungle. Philon realises in dismay that the danger is only increasing. Vida, in his raging speed, crashes through heavy branches as if they are fragile threads. The Greek notices suddenly that a branch of an arm's thickness is obstructing the way. The howda is trapped, but Philon, who has been hit on his head by a branch, holds on to another one with his right hand. While Vida moves on, the branch bends to the ground under the weight of the two people.

‘My Rani ... I must let you fall!’

‘Do not worry!’

He releases her carefully and she rolls onto the path, but gets up nimbly and looks anxiously up at her friend, who swings above at the end of the

branch.

‘Move to the side a little, high Rani ... I will let go!’

He falls down and loses consciousness. Kancha sees only now that his head is hurt. She sits down, takes his head in her lap, just as Savitri did with Satyavant, flits through her mind. Worried, she waits, not knowing what to do, she gently strokes him. Then a gripping fear overcomes her: Will he die as Satyavat did in the woods? Yama?

‘Philon, Philon!’ she cries anxiously.

Finally, he opens his eyes, and smiles when he sees that she has been saved.

‘Oh, fine ... Kancha.’ Embarrassed, he does his best to stand up. ‘Forgive me, high Rani. I could not do anything but hold on to you.’

Kancha blushes. ‘Please call me Kancha again! I felt wondrously safe in your strong arms, my ... friend!’ Softly, her hand glides once again over his head wound. ‘Do you have pain? Lie down, I will alert the others!’ And with the agility of a child of the mahavana, she scurries back to the Ashoka Road. There she sees the riders approaching, who had not even seen what had happened. Diti has warned them. Together, they hurry to the place where Philon is lying. He is carefully brought back to the road, where a camp is hastily set up, and because of Kancha’s good care, the Greek recovers quickly. Vida has disappeared into the jungle. The next day the journey is resumed. Kancha and Philon take their place on another elephant and the horsemen now follow them. Kancha shows great concern for the injured one.

‘The Mleccha thanks you, Kancha, for your good care,’ he smiles.

‘Mleccha! My Father is a sage in the mahavana, my Philon. And I lived several years close to the holy Maharajah. To those two we are all human beings. And you ... are my rescuer and my best friend!’

Philon reaches his hand out to her. ‘I would like to bow down in the manner of your country and kiss the hem of your dress, Kancha, but in my country we take our friends’ hands.’

Kancha grips his tightly and their eyes sparkle in acknowledgment.

‘We refrain from touching for a long time, my Philon ...’

One of the horsemen has returned speedily to Pataliputra. When he informs the Maharajah about the incident, Ashoka smiles and whispers

quietly: ‘Good, my Kancha, you found a younger friend in place of the old Maharajah!’

Dasaratha has come from Nepal to the capital. He is young and calm and like his mother Charumati, a follower of Ashoka’s Dharma, obedient, sympathetic and predisposed to all that is good.

The Maharajah rides with him to the Khalatika-hills⁷, north of Gaya, where a few famous underground chaityas have been donated by him to the Ajivikas, the sect of his mother, Subhadrangi. It has taken several years for the stone masons to carve out the caves from the obstinate stone. Afterwards, the artists of Chuny smoothed, sanded and polished the walls, which also required a number of years. Finally, they were ready: three caves. An Ajivika priest leads Ashoka and Dasaratha inside. The Maharajah looks at the work for a long time. He cannot say what moves him more. It is not the size⁸, perhaps the glow of the polished walls and ceiling, the serene peace of the simple dignity of these shimmering caves. They evoke a feeling of longing to meditate, to cast off all that life has accumulated as a heavy, growing burden upon the shoulders; of oblivion into subconscious beauty: as if here, under the burden of the heavy weight of the hill, has rolled off the burden of the soul. Dasaratha remains silent, because Grandfather is so deep in thought.

‘Read what it says, Dasaratha.’ Ashoka says finally.

‘His Graceful Majesty the Maharajah, twelve years after his anointment, donated this Nigrodha cave to the Ajivikas.’

‘They are beautiful and offer serenity, Dasaratha.’

‘Wonderful, my Grandfather. When I become Maharajah, I also want to have caves carved out, just as beautiful as these.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you do it!’ and he wraps his arms around Ashoka.

‘Maybe, then there will be other, greater works that wait to be built.’

Dasaratha thinks. ‘I want to be like you!’

Why is it that his descendants are so inclined to blindly follow him, while what he really wants is that they should develop their own self? He has viewed his own insight as right and therefore he wanted to reveal it in images and stone. Does his example work in such a way, that they do not

grow towards independence? He himself has never compelled anyone towards Buddhism. There where is only good, is Nirvana, the realm of eternal peace and bliss. But 'life' recognises evil as an element of the world! The good is the joy of life, evil the necessity, the trishna that acknowledges nothing but the 'I', the individual, in his struggle for life. But that in turn will evoke, eternally, the power of self-denial, compassion, the reasonableness in man, and thus create the harmony that perpetually guards life in its pursuit for the highest.



WHAT BECOMES, PERISHES

One day as subjects from different parts of his empire jostle around in the audience hall, Satyavat announces Shantanika. Ashoka frowns. He is tired. Nevertheless, when he recalls how frankly Shantanika spoke, maybe he has repented. He says: 'Let Shantanika visit me tonight, Satyavat.' And the Maharajah continues to give audience to his subjects. Most concern petty grievances against the small injustices inevitably thrown up by the great measures, or serious complaints against government officials, requests for services regarding the construction of viharas or chaityas, the installation or improvement of irrigation channels. These are the things with which the people bother the Maharajah, day in day out, because they need his drive. It tires him nowadays to keep watch over all these interests.

Afterwards he walks to the large pond. Alone, estranged from everything that was dear to him, but seeking strength for what his holy will demands of him in his work and thoughts.

Shantanika comes by in the evening.

'Has Shantanika turned to the true Buddha?'

'Indeed, I have years ago, O, Maharajah, but according to my own insight, which is certainly not the same as yours. If I could, I would establish a separate Buddhist sect.'

‘So, you have not changed your heretical views?’

‘I am not aware of any heresy, O, Maharajah. Since I was excluded from the Sangha—which I fully acknowledged your right to do— I have trudged along the great roads of India, to experience how Buddhism fares in your great empire, to see whether it will unite people. There is much enthusiasm for your Dharma.’

‘And will it one day hold sway over the world, turn the inner vision?’

Shantanika smiles: ‘If you remain the Maharajah forever and maintain your strength.’

‘And if my successors possess merely my good intentions?’

‘If your successors possess not only your holy fire, but also your power, your mental fortitude and your capacities, O, Maharajah ...’ Ashoka looks annoyed. ‘You assess the people, yet there is one you do not know: Yourself. You think that the All-Spirit has chosen you to direct the people towards the Buddha. You have lost that conviction since Kunala’s fate.’

‘Indeed, that did weaken me. Weaken, Shantanika! Why did he fall?’

‘The world runs its own course in spite of you. Kunala went down physically. Who will guarantee that one day an Emperor like Nanda, or a father-killer like Ajatashatru, will not usurp the throne! That not a Maharajah will rule who will erase your edicts from the rocks or lose himself in the doctrine of the Buddha, forgetting his land and his people, or one who will more and more strengthen his army and use it like Alexander, the Macedonian?’

‘You are right, Shantanika. At the close of my life I must confess that neither a great nor a small army will secure the survival of my empire.’

‘So is it, O, Maharajah! What you have desired is from you, and falls with you. The Sangha—the community—is dependent on you, but it should be dependent on the eternal, unborn God, the Buddha! Fate did not wish Kunala. What lies hidden in the karma of the next Maharajah, disaster or blessing? It will not depend on you, O, Maharajah! The ‘becoming’ has to grow from the sum total of the all-Will which dwells in the entire humanity. Fate is not whimsical; it is merely an unknown force, the result of all movement in matter and spirit. Karma is the necessary justice of the All-Spirit, in relation to man’s free will. You, O, Maharajah, work with superhuman strength to the improvement of that karma. With superhuman strength you rule a world empire. But when that double-superhuman

strength is no longer there, what then, O, Maharajah? Who then will continue your work? There is but one Buddha in one kalpa¹, only one Maharajah like you in one kalpa. Kunala felt that. Dasaratha will experience it, too; hence their strong dependence on your will.'

'That would be the overthrow of all that I have considered as my primary goal in life, Shantanika.'

'You will now divide your realm in two. That is the first blow. Do you believe that Buddhism, east of the Sarasvati, will remain the same as that in the west, as that in Lanka?'

'It has to, Shantanika, otherwise the world is lost!'

'Then the world is lost, O, Maharajah. Nor, you can stop the way Buddhism grows!'

'The sara of all religions!'

'Yes, the sara of all religions. But you have not established the eternal connection, the symbol of your sara: Atman, Brahman, the one God...'

'There is your return to the old Brahmanism, Shantanika!'

'No, it is that struggling out of the unboundedness, the flight to the one truth. It is the God Buddha, O, Maharajah, the unborn Eternal!'

'You want the return of Brahma, Shantanika! The Buddha was a human being, an example, attainable for the true follower!'

'But in the hands of every heretic, mouldable. He is the symbol of the All-Spirit, Brahman, and therefore God, who has to be identified with the Buddha.'

Ashoka reflects for a long time.

'Mankind requires an unshakeable support. Well then, give them ...' Shantanika wants to go on but Ashoka raises his hand and Shantanika respectfully falls silent. Finally, the Maharajah says: 'I fear the priests, Shantanika.'

'The priests will become and perish; God Buddha will be the Unborn, the Unchangeable in the maya. As long as the Sangha is dependent on a worldly power, it is at the mercy of the will of any Maharajah. That is good as long as you are alive, but what afterwards?'

Again, Ashoka thinks. 'I cannot see it the way you do, to create a God for my subjects and the Sangha, because it contradicts the truth. I want Buddha's Teachings to remain just as they were handed down and as it was

recorded at the great Council of Thousand under the leadership of a most earnest and true person as Moggalitissa.'

'With that you pass the sentence on the Buddhism of India, O, Maharajah.'

'The Buddha gave the Sangha a life of a thousand years. So, man has another eight centuries to reconsider.'

'Only you can give to the Sangha the unity, the inner strength, in the God-being of the Buddha. It would attain eternalness!'

'I will bow my head, Shantanika if the Sangha will follow that path. I myself cannot. The goal of every man should be to achieve heaven by his earthly life. He must strive from within for his spiritual perfection. That is why the man Buddha is and should be the shining example.'

Shantanika stands up, bows deeply before the Maharajah, and departs.

Ashoka is very much affected by this discussion. His certainty has gone. Has he passed the sentence on Buddhism, he, who spread it infinitely throughout India? He had wanted to bind the future happiness of his people to well-meaning descendants. Is that not possible? Because there appears only one Maharajah like him in one kalpa? He smiles sadly. Kunala would have been like him! If ...

When Radhagupta—who is now always present when the messengers are received—appears, the Maharajah is still wrestling in the confusing labyrinth of his thoughts.

'Tell me, Radhagupta, do I not know myself? Do you think it will happen that with me as Maharajah, my life's work stands and falls? Is it as Shantanika says, is it but once in a kalpa that a Maharajah like me is born?'

'So it is, Lord. Your entire life has been a surrender to the flowering of the spiritual and material elevation of your people. But your life's work will be an eternal guiding Light; you are the Great Admonisher of humankind; you are the world's Great Teacher.

'You have been able to abolish the wars of invasion.

'You have, because of that, brought peace and prosperity to millions.

'You have made the teachings of the small sect of the Buddha into a great religion that will unite the world.

'You have, through your wise reign, given to a mighty empire peace and security.' Ashoka smiles as Radhagupta continues with his tribute.

‘You have brought to your many wild tribes, maybe even to the world, what the Buddha taught – compassion, which softens the mores, and you gave compassion wings so that it could fly over the entire world.’ Again the Maharajah smiles, and Radhagupta is not done.

‘You have also brought joy and peace to animals through your loving protection of everything that was besieged by cruelty.

‘You have immortalised your name by your great humanity.

‘You have introduced by your governing and verdicts, everywhere, justice and compassion, and you have always been accessible to each one who felt aggrieved in your great empire and let justice be served to him.

‘You have kept the Teachings of Buddha pure, Lord, banished heresy from the Sangha, brought the Dharma to the peoples.

‘You have, by purifying the samaja, by your organising of pilgrimages to the sacred places of the Buddha, by your ever-flowing gifts of charity to all sects, by diverting the rich resources of the great empire for the welfare of the peoples, turned the inner view of all, maybe even of the world, at least softened it.

‘You have etched in stone, what you yourself have been as a glorious Maharajah, an example for your peoples, and you constructed in stone what you regard as worthy of existing. That what is good will be eternal. There upon your empire is built.

‘Tolerance is the most beautiful and fragrant flower of all that your fertile mind has allowed to flower, to the benefit of all our people.

‘And finally, Lord, no Buddhist has better understood the last words of the Buddha which is the essence of Buddhism: *‘appamadena sampadetha²*’. So it is, Lord.’

Ashoka remains deep in thought for a long time, bent over. Then Satyavat appears; he wants to announce a prativedaka. The Maharajah signals him to wait. Finally, he says: ‘Is all of that, mine, my Radhagupta?’

‘Certainly, Lord!’

‘And with me all this will be lost? So, my work is useless?’

‘The light of your deeds and your name will live on through the ages, just as the fragrance of the kovidara tree does in the heavens, Lord. And it will shine in the hearts of everyone who hears about you. Your empire may crumble, but your love and compassion for all living beings will energise the heartbeat of man for all ages to come.’

‘Since Kunala’s return from Taxila I am beset by grave doubts. I thought I had given my empire a foundation as indestructible as stone ... Maya, my Radhagupta! I must now salvage what I can. Dasaratha is young. I do not know if he will have the strength to rule this country with a steady hand. Kanchanamala will guide Sampadi’s first steps. Will you support Dasaratha when he needs support, when I have gone, Radhagupta.’

‘As much as I am able, Lord, I will support whatever is yours.’

Ashoka makes a sign for the prativedaka to be allowed to enter. Satyavat reports that Kullika has arrived from Vidisha. Ashoka welcomes him with great joy in his heart.

‘You look so grave, my Kullika. Perhaps, you have a new misfortune to report! I have reached the age when death, separation and disaster strike continuously.’

‘Unfortunately yes, holy Maharajah, Maharani Devi has passed away.’

Ashoka falls back on his seat. This is the final blow.

‘Illness?’

‘Yes. I was able to soothe her last moments. Her sole concern was that you would miss her love. Every deed, every devout thought was dedicated to you, and its sole intention was to support your difficult work, to give your musings wings and to strengthen your faith and your ideals. She never had the feeling that she was missing you, because her mind was too profoundly woven with yours. I had to promise her that I would return to Pataliputra to replace her.’

‘Thank you, my Kullika. Satyavat will take care of you.’

Then the messengers appear. Mahamatras, who have returned from their far-off inspection tours, dharma-mahamatras, who promote tolerance among the sects in the empire and cut out the unjust outgrowths of the jurisdiction and ease the suffering of the old and the unfortunate, prativedakas who trace out political unrest and establish secret connections, spies who investigate untrustworthy government officials or subversive elements, individuals who are dangerous to the state. The Maharajah’s diligence does not slacken for a moment.

‘You are very tired, Lord!’ Kullika says later that night.

‘Perhaps, my friend. Does not tiredness mean lacking heart, the inner drive, the support that the loftiest principle or the most beloved one, inspires in us? It is surprising that I always felt her love in the depths of my

soul as ever-radiating warmth and as a driving force too: ‘the great thought of the Buddha as folded into one lotus bud’... in the heart of Devi. She was my shining example. I never understood why she would not come to Pataliputra. Now I know that she was right: our love was so vast that it enveloped the world and heavens, so that physical separation hardly touched us. In Sanchi, she was able to work on her grand idea. From there it will, for eternity, spread the tender glory of her work over my empire. What I desired from the Sangha, she created in the most perfect form, like a luminous star. Her love for me purified itself in Sanchi. My love for her directed itself to the radiant purity of her pursuit.’

Kullika nods repeatedly at the words of the Maharajah. He sees how the wrinkled hand passes over the high forehead again and again, as if trying to wipe away painful thoughts.

‘The progression in the life of the holy Maharajah brought her ever more happiness, Lord. Until the tragedy with Kunala. She did not believe you would recover from that and that shook her life.’

‘My greatest happiness and indispensable support in my life have been my many good friends, my Kullika. Stay here, until the end, if you want to wait for that.’

Ashoka stands up and goes to take rest.

It will soon be the anniversary of his ascension to the throne. Messengers are sent through the entire empire to announce that the holy Maharajah will revoke the death penalty for all those condemned to death and reduce the penalties for others. Generous gifts are presented. Pataliputra is dressed up in festive attire, the city of flowers! Ministers, high government officials, monks, priests of all sects pay their respects to the holy Maharajah. In a colourful procession, people in festive clothes: craftsmen, employees of all departments, soldiers from the four divisions, march along the King’s Road, past the palace, from where the Maharajah, on a platform, observes the parade. At night time when once again the parade goes by in the illuminated streets, the holy Maharajah does not appear: Kullika and the court-physicians worry about him getting too exhausted. The following day he takes measures, if necessary others will have to take over his tasks.

During the night, Satyavat, Kullika and Dasaratha are called to see him. He reaches his hand out to Satyavat.

‘Thank you, my friend. Protect Dasaratha the way you always protected me.’ Satyavat kneels down and the Maharajah lays a blessing palm upon his head. ‘Greet ... Rohini ...

‘Kullika, thank you for coming to Pataliputra.

‘Your highest duty, Dasaratha, is the promotion of everyone’s well-being and the basis for that is ... effort and dedication to work ... If you exert yourself, you will fulfil the debt that the Maharajah owes to all the living creatures of his empire ... Make them happy in this world, so that they may reach heaven in the beyond ... That is difficult ... except by great, persistent effort ... Endeavour ... and work ... your whole life long, so that you will be a happy and worthy human being³ ...’

Kullika gently takes Ashoka’s hand in his.

‘I see the great Light shining ... Kullika ... that permeates everything ... but casts no shadow ... At last ... the unalloyed rest ... with Devi...’



ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1. Crown Prince, Kunala.
2. *Rig Veda* 1. 115 and *Arthava Veda* 13.
3. Heat, self-unfolding.
4. Referring to himself the Buddha used the term: Tathagata.
5. High Council.
6. May-June, hottest season.
7. The great forest, the jungle.

Chapter 2

1. An altar which has an opening on all four sides.
2. A Buddhist monk; wandering ascetic.
3. Lay-Buddhist.
4. literally: Golden necklace.

Chapter 4

1. 'Becoming released': compulsory communal confession in a Buddhist monastery.
2. 'Purification': declaration of an ill person, that he is free of sin.
3. Also known as Mogaliputtatissa.

4. Indian sophists; erroneous teachers.
5. Tanha in Pali, Trshna in Sanskrit: thirst for life, craving.
6. Bell made out of five metals.

Chapter 5

1. Marshy scrub forests at the foot of the mountain chain of the Himalayas.
2. 2nd life stage of the Brahmin, householder.
3. The celibate life of a Veda student.
4. Custom at the end of the tutelage.
5. Taking of the hand is a wedding ceremony.
6. *Atharva Veda*: 5.17.
7. The varuna tree is said to be boon-giver mentioned in Kiratajuniya.
8. A green bark tree, native to Magadha.
9. Great offering ladles; the Ranghuvamsa 11.25 says offering ladles are made from the wood of this tree.
10. Wind god.
11. Hottest month: mid June–mid July.
12. Snakes and peacocks are enemies.

Chapter 6

1. Literally: small shrine, here the name of the village.
2. Final ceremony after completion of the tutelage.
3. Expresses the relationship of Guru to brahmacharin: *Atharva Veda* 11.5.

Chapter 7

1. *Rig Veda* 10.129 Kants: 'Ding an sich'.
2. Tapas. Manu's idea of the cosmic egg, floating on the world's sea, hatched through tapas.
3. Kama: love, more elaborate: trishna, thirst for life, desire to live, Will of Nature.
4. Atman, in man himself.

5. Between the higher (spiritual) and lower (physical) planes.
6. Primordial being.

Chapter 8

1. Rainbow.
2. Wise trees mentioned in the *Ritusamhara*.
3. Song bird of the Finch family, all over India.
4. September, October.

Chapter 10

1. The well-known 3rd Buddhist Council in Pataliputra, the basis of Mahindra's Buddhism in Sri Lanka.
2. Also viewed as Cosmic consciousness.
3. High grade officers and Princes of royal blood (Kumara).
4. Autumn.
5. Monsoon.
6. Month after the rainy season (mid September – mid October)
7. Trees normally grown near temples.
8. Red Lotus.
9. October–November.

Chapter 11

1. A small mountain range in the Himalayas.
2. Usually known as Siddhartha.
3. Usually known as Yashodhara, 'the one whose treasure is renowned'.
4. Charioteers are highly educated and refined men throughout ancient Indian literature.
5. Demi-gods, heavenly dancers.
6. Also named: Alara Kalama.
7. Also named: Uddaka Ramaputta.
8. Dukkha: literally translated 'that which is difficult to be endured'.

9. The Mallas refused. Their stupa was opened in 1898 at Piprava.
10. God Indra.
11. A virtue practiced absolutely. Compassion is the greatest of the six paramitas.

Chapter 12

1. Term of abuse for Buddhist monks.

Chapter 13

1. A bliss bringing one.

Chapter 14

1. November-December.
2. Head of the city.
3. Another name for the Ganga.
4. The mountains of *Garcinia indica*.
5. Manassa lake.
6. September–October.
7. October–November.
8. (An offshoot of) this Bodhi tree is still alive in Sri Lanka.
9. A long single piece of unbleached cloth wrapped below the waist.
10. May, June, hottest month.

Chapter 15

1. March–April.
2. April–May.
3. Viceroy.
4. Buddhists.
5. Manu I.93.
6. In the old Greece the law was – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

7. Hindukush.
8. Hellenic dynasty of Iran.
9. Ormuzd.
10. Ariman.
11. 25 years after Ashoka's death the king of Bactria took the Punjab. Later the Scythes invaded India.

Chapter 16

1. Foreigners, here: Greeks.
2. North-west of the empire, now Kandahar, Afghanistan.
3. Lipi: decree, recordings of events for history, here rock-edict.
4. Literally: Devanampiya Pyadasi.
5. This edict is beyond doubt of Ashoka himself.
6. Messenger.
7. Hall of religious meditation.
8. Horse-riders people in Mid-Asia.
9. This edict and column were moved to Allahabad in later times and still exist.
10. End-ceremony of the brahmacharin at his guru's.

Chapter 17

1. A drama on stage.
2. A play, partly by human, partly by divine beings, in 5 – 9 acts.
3. Goddess of happiness and beauty.
4. Godly inventor of the Art of Drama.
5. The player who beats a small iron rod.
6. Flute.
7. A revered sage, who is a mediator between gods and men.
8. A very benevolent king.
9. A king of old times.
10. Son of Visvavat.

11. Yama is also the God of Justice.
12. Pali is the language of the lipis of Ashoka.

Chapter 18

1. Nectar, drink of the gods.
2. September-October.
3. The heaven.
4. The subterranean empire of the snakes.
5. In motion like a leaf of a poplar.
6. A ritual that seals a bond, a marriage, Saptapadi.

Chapter 19

1. In the edicts Ashoka only refers to himself as: Devanampiya (the beloved of the gods) Pyadasi (with gracious mean).
2. The 'flame of the wood', sweet berry tree, very typical for Malwa.
3. Pilgrims path around the foot of the dome.
4. Dome.

Chapter 20

1. Even today there are evidences of structures built by Greeks and Romans in North India.
2. Great Vedic grammarian.
3. A species of grain, basmati.

Chapter 21

1. Antioch Soter had ceded Aria, Archosia and Gedrosia to the Mauryas.
2. Kabul.
3. Capital of Bactria.

Chapter 22

1. A kind of priest
2. Community tradition

Chapter 23

1. October-November
2. February–March

Chapter 24

1. The evil personified.
2. Now Allahabad
3. Two trees whose rub-wood is used for sacred fires.

Chapter 26

1. Old popular festival with animal fights and drink.
2. The origin of the current temple-processions, temple celebrations, or yatras, culminating in the grand temple procession.
3. Heavenly place; Indra's paradise.
4. Sitting cross-legged, in lotus position.
5. Symbolic hand gesture, where the index finger and the thumb touch, while the other fingers are straight.
6. Regent queen.
7. Now: Barabar-Hills.
8. The first is 10 x 4, 26 x 2 m with a ceiling of 1.42 m.

Chapter 27

1. Kalpa is one period before destruction and renewal of the universe.
2. It is not important to familiarise oneself with dogmas but to continually try to improve oneself, to strive for spiritual perfection.
3. According to rock – edict VI.

Epilogue

1. The law of oneness, law of correspondence, law of vibration, laws derived from the law of vibration, the law of polarity, law of rhythm, law of cause and effect and law of dynamic balance, including the law of Harmonic Division.



EPILOGUE

Ashoka did not seek to impose his personal religion upon the people. Indeed nowhere in his edicts does he mention the chief characteristics of Buddhism; the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the goal of Nirvana. The 'Dharma' which he presents to the world is to say the essence or sara of all religions. He prescribes a code of conduct with a view to making life happier and pure ... Sometimes (P.E.II, R.E.VII) Ashoka defines the 'Dharma' as comprising charity (dana), compassion (daya), truthfulness (sach or satyam), purity (sochaye or saucham), self-control (samyama), gratitude (katamnata or kritajnata), steadfastness (dadhabatita or dridhabaktita) and so on. Negatively it is freedom from sin (papam), which is the outcome of anger (kodhe or krodah), cruelty (nittulye or naisthuryam), pride (manam), and jealousy (ishya or irsha), etc. (P.E. III). These are points common to all religions and so Ashoka can hardly be accused of utilising his vast powers as sovereign in the interest of any particular creed. To him therefore goes the credit of first conceiving the idea of a universal religion synonymous with Duty in its broader sense.

— Rama Shankar Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*

In the many years that I have been occupied with mediating the translation of the Ashoka- trilogy, I have often felt as if I had found a treasure at the bottom of a sunken ship that I wished to retrieve and hand over to others; in

the very first place to the Indians because it concerns their history but also to all the seekers in the wide world to introduce them to Ashoka as a seeker of truth.

I feel very grateful and privileged that these books came my way. It inspired me to read the many beautiful books there are about the history of ancient India, and what past and present scholars contributed to the legacy of Ashoka. It was and still is a very fulfilling hobby. It led me to read the great epic works of India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in the new narration of Ramesh Menon, so delicate and soul-caressing that it will forever be a refuge to go back to in times of distress. It led me to read many books of contemporary great masters like Osho whose Dhammapada, a series of discourses compiled in twelve books on sutras of the Buddha, opened eye and heart for many things on my quest.

What may have intrigued me most is Ashoka's *sara*, the inner essence, the moral or behavioural code at the heart of all sects and creeds, and the call in his edicts to respect all as they bring forth a view on conduct to make life happier and purer: the *Dharmavijaya*.

For a Westerner it is not easy to get a grip on the meaning of dharma or dhamma. Is it righteousness? Is it something ethical from which a moral code is derived? It was Osho's Dhammapada that opened my eyes that dharma is more of a universal law like water that has to flow down or fire rising up. Are ethics or is right morality then fundamentally like a physical law? The next step of thought for me was a Dutch book by Marja de Vries: *The Whole Elephant in the Picture*, published in the Netherlands by Ankh-Hermes in 2007. The author, now a fabric artist but scientifically schooled as a biologist and ecologist, has a past of sharing and exploring deep spiritual experiences amongst non-western cultures. With her knowledge of both worlds, the spiritual and the scientific, she started searching for new ways to teach and learn, more in tune with our essential self, and came across the Universal Laws as they already were recognised in ancient times¹. She discovered that those universal laws and the golden ratio can be found in all different wisdom traditions. They are the universal principles underlying all energies and the dynamics of order and harmony of the universe. She could identify and illustrate these laws with numerous new, cutting-edge scientific understandings.

The Cosmic laws, the energy laws, the same for the inner spiritual world as well as the outer physical? Inescapable laws of Nature, if we wish to live

in harmony with our self and our surroundings? Is that what makes that enlightened masters – though with different methods for different times and cultures – in essence bring the same message? Is that behind Ashoka's sara and dharma? For me all of a sudden the concept of 'dharma' was brought to the western world as a modern concept. It was like East meeting West or an enlightened being shaking hands with Einstein.

Is Ashoka's dhammavijaya still as fresh today as it was over two thousand years ago? In a world where we are daily confronted in the mass-media with numerous victims of ethnic or religious conflicts? Do we have to re-invent a new universal code of morality applicable to all humanity though it may manifest itself through the thousands of rays of the spectrum in different cultures in different forms?

The reader of *Ashoka The Great* must decide for himself. The third volume of the trilogy in the original Dutch version was called *Ashoka: The Great Admonisher*, admonishing seen more as instructing and creating awareness than in how we associate it today. It was not easy to reframe but several suggestions led to *Ashoka: The World's Great Teacher*. We hope he will be remembered like this by many.

J.E.S. August 2010



¹ The law of oneness, law of correspondence, law of vibration, laws derived from the law of vibration, the law of polarity, law of rhythm, law of cause and effect and law of dynamic balance, including the law of Harmonic Division

GLOSSARY

Adhavaryu	Vedic priest who performs sacrifices
Aditi	Goddess; mother of the gods
Aditya	Solar gods
Agni	God of Fire; main deity in Vedic rituals
Aham	Aham Brahma Asmi: I am Brahma: Advaita Vedanta
Ahimsa	Non-injury; non-violence
Ajatashatru	King of Magadha who murdered his father, Bimbisara
Ajivika, Ajivaka	Orthodox sect of ascetics, contemporaries of the early Buddhists
Amarkantaka	Mountains east of Vindhya
Amitraghata	Slayer of foes; conqueror of enemies
Anga	Kingdom on the borders of modern Bengal
Ansa	Essence; being; core
Apsaras	Heavenly nymphs
Aranyakas	Vedic texts
Arhat	Literally: Holy, in Buddhist sense
Arjuna	Pandava Prince renowned for his skills in archery

Arthashastra	Treatise on polity written by Kautilya/Chanakya
Arya	Native of Aryavarta; a noble person
Aryavarta	Land of the Aryans, India
Ashoka	Greatest Emperor of India; literally: ‘without causing sorrow’
Ashoka tree	Orange, red flowering tree that belongs to the teak family and blooms when struck by a woman’s ankles
Ashvins	Twin deities representing earth and sky, day and night
Ashramas	The four stages of life of an Aryan.
<i>Atharva Veda</i>	One of the four Vedas; also magical spells and incantations in verse form
Atman	The Self; The Absolute
Bactria	A region on the borders of Afghanistan and fed by the river Oxus
Bhairava	Melodic raaga (tune) that is sung at dawn
Banyan	<i>Ficus indica</i> also known as Vata or Nyagrodha tree in Buddhism
Bharata	Ancient India
Bharya	Indian skylark; habitat: all over India
Brahma	Lord of Beings, Prajapati
Brahma aikyam	Brahman atman aikyam, i.e. Brahman and Atman are one
Brahman	The Absolute Self; the Atman
Brahmin	Priestly class, the first among the twice-born
Brahmanas	Texts on sacrificial rituals
Bramacharin	First stage of an Arya’s life in which he lives in celibacy and is devoted to studies
Brihadaranyaka	Upanishad dealing with the doctrine of Transmigration
Chakra	Discus, a weapon of war
Chanakya	Another name for Kautilya who wrote the <i>Arthashastra</i>
Chandala	Non-Aryan people; also means an untouchable
Chandogya	Upanishad belonging to the <i>Sama Veda</i> , dealing with meditation

Chandra	Moon
Cowrie	Sea shells of a particular shape used for gambling and as coinage
Dandanita	Art of punishment mentioned in the <i>Arthashastra</i>
Dasyus	Relicts of Harappan culture, dark, brutish people who worshipped the phallus
Deva	Any deity
Devi	Any goddess, also a respectable way of addressing a woman
Dharma	Righteousness, duty
Doab	Land lying between two rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna
Drona	The preceptor, guru of the Pandavas and the Kauravas
Dushyanta	Classical drama by poet Kalidasa
Dyaus	A father god figure known to the Aryans
Gandhara	School of art
Gandharva	Marriage by mutual consent; love marriage
Gandharvas	Heavenly musicians
Gandiva	Fabled bow of Arjuna given by Agni
Ganesha	Elephant-headed god, remover of obstacles; god of wisdom
Ganga	Sacred river. A dip in the river is said to absolve all sins
Ganika	A courtesan
Ghanta	The great bell
Gantha	Writer
Gautama	The Buddha or Shakyamuni
Gautama	Another name for Sage Bharadvaja who propounded the Nyaya philosophy
Gautama	Sage belonging to the family of Angirasa
Gaya	Town in Magadha which is a sacred site for Buddhists
Ghee	Clarified butter
Grablambhama	Ritualistic ceremonies for begetting children
Grihasta	Householder, the second stage in an Arya's life

Grihyasutra	Rites pertaining to domestic life
Grishma	Summer season, from May to July
Guru	Spiritual teacher, venerable person
Haetera	Prostitute
Hemant	Winter season, from November to January
Himavan	The winter season
Himavant	Hindu god of snow, personification of the Himalayan mountain range, where Parvati was born
Hindola	Melodic form associated with love
Hotri	Sacrificial priest who recites from <i>Rig Veda</i> at oblations
Indra	Lord of the gods, of firmament; of lightning, thunder
Indraprastha	Delhi
Indus	Source in Hindukush mountains, area of great civilisations
Jainism	A reaction to the pretensions of Brahmans, focussing on the quest for salvation
Jainas	Followers of Mahavira Jaina
Jambudvipa	Central of the seven continents around mythical Mt Meru and another name for ancient India
Janaka	Philosopher king of Videha
Jataka	Collection of Buddhist tales in Pali canon
Jyeshtha	Lunar month between May and June
Kailasha	Mountain, considered to be the abode of Shiva
Kala	Time
Kalpa	A day of Brahma
Kama	Love; desire; cupid
Kapilavastu	The Buddha's birthplace
Karma	Literally: deeds. Also, effects of former deeds, performed either in this life or in a previous one
Karmansa	Tributary of the Ganga
Karna	Flute
Karnak	An elephant handler
Karnikara	Jungle creeper

Kartaki	Full moon day in Kartika
Kartikeya	God of war, Lord Shiva's son
Kartika	Lunar month between October and November
Kashi	Present day Benaras or Varnasi; one of the great holy cities
Kassas	A dynasty of kings at the time of the Mauryas
Kautilya	Another name for Chanakya; authored the <i>Arthashastra</i>
Kekisikha	A species of the Kadamba tree with very fragrant medicinal flowers
Kokila	Indian nightingale
Kosali	The country of Kosala
Krishna	God who assumes human form and guides the Pandavas
Kshatriya	The warrior class and the second of the four varnas
Kullika	Chief of the Kulla clan
Kurukshetra	The Kuru country of the <i>Mahabharata</i>
Kusha grass	Sacred grass, <i>Poa cynosurides</i> , used in religious rites
Kusinara	Modern Kasia
Madhyadesha	Middle country mentioned in the <i>Brihat Samhita</i> XIV.3
Magadha	One of the 16 great countries, modern Bihar
Magadhi	Language of the Magadhan people
Mahabharata	The great Indian epic; Literally: great country
Mahadeva	Another name for Shiva; means 'great lord'
Mahamatra	High official
Majjhimadesa	Also known as Madhyadesa
Malavas	A tribe of the Punjab region
Manas	Mental wisdom, spiritual wisdom, intelligence of the heart, sixth sense
Manasa	Holy lake situated in Hatakha or Ladakh and the home of the Kinnaras
Manu	Author of <i>Dharmashastra</i> and <i>Manusmriti</i> , a sage
Manu	Son of king Virasat, king of men, the first man
<i>Manusmriti</i>	Code of Manu which made the varnas rigid
Mara	Evil one; Death dealer

Maruts	Rig Vedic deities; Children of Rudra, gusts of wind
Masha	A gold bit used as coinage
Matariswan	The aide and messenger of the God Agni
Mathura	Ancient town situated on the right bank of the Yamuna; also present-day Mathura
Maurya	Greatest of Indian empires founded by Chandragupta Maurya
Maya	In Vedantic philosophy, it means ‘unreality’; also means illusion, enchantment
Mekala	Another name for Amarkantaka, the source of the Narmada
Meru	Mythological mountain around which planets revolve; Shiva’s abode
Mithra	Linked to Aditya and the Sun
Mleccha	Non-Aryan, a barbarian
Nachiketas	Interlocutor of the <i>Katha Upanishad</i>
Naga	Fabled serpent demons having the head of a human and the body of a serpent
Naga	A tribe of the present-day north-eastern India
Nagaur	A kind of drum
Nanda	The Nanda empire of Bimbisara
Narada	Brahmin priest; also the Sage Narada
Narmada	A major river in the Deccan
Nataka	Literally: a drama
Nirgantha	A Jaina monk
Niska	A gold coin
Nyaya	School of logic and philosophy
Pana	A gold or silver coin
Panchayat	Literally: a council of five; institution of traditional Indian village administration
Pandavas	The five sons of Pandu, Princes of the <i>Mahabharata</i>
Parvati	Literally: ‘mountain-born’; consort of Shiva
Pasenadi	King of Kosala, also known as Prasenjit

Pataliputra	Capital of the Mauryas, modern-day Patna
Prajapati	Lord of all Beings; also called Brahma
Prakarana	Sub-division of a subject matter
Prakriti	Primeval matter; nature. Here referring to a woman from House of Pleasure, like courtesan
Purohita	Chief Priest; court priest and king's advisor
Purusha	Primeval man; also head of an organisation; a leader
Putrampjiva	Mixture of roots for conceiving of a child
Putras	Progeny
Rakshasa	Demon; Demonic being
Ravana	King of Lanka and enemy of Rama
<i>Rig Veda</i>	One of the Vedas with a collection of more than 1,000 hymns dedicated to various deities
Rishi	Seers, sages; composers of hymns to the gods
Rudra	God associated with storms; guardian deity of healing herbs
Saayana	Commentator of the <i>Rig Veda</i>
Shakuni	The crooked priest and also a despicable character in the <i>Mahabharata</i> .
Shakyamuni	Gautama Buddha; Literally: sage from the Shakya clan
Samans	Verses from the <i>Sama Veda</i>
Samaveda	One of the Vedas containing liturgical hymns
Samhitas	Combination of letters according to euphonic rules in the Vedas
Sankalpa	Resolve; pupose of rituals
Samkhya	or One of the six schools of classical Indian philosophy;
Sankhya	Distinction between the self and matter
Sannyasin	One who has renounced the world and all its attachments
Sarangi	Stringed instrument played with a bow
Sarasvati	Sacred river said to flow under the Thar and joins the Ganga
Sartavahas	Leaders of caravans
Sati	Self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre

Savitr	Ray of light descended from the Sun
Savitri	The loyal wife of Satyavanta; a three-day fast kept by Hindu women
Shakuntala	Daughter of sage Vishvamitra brought up by birds; marries Dushyanta
Sharad	Autumn from September to November
Shigar	River, North of Taxila
Shishira	Cool season from January to March
Shiva	Creator and destroyer, of yoga and yogis
Shivi	Character from the Jatakas known for his generosity
Shloka	A metrical verse said to have mystical properties
Shraddha	Ancestor worship for one's prosperity
Shrauta Sutras	Texts on sacrificial rituals
Shravasti	Also known as Savathi, capital of Kosala
Shudra	Lowest of the four classes
Sila	Right way of life
Sinhala	Modern-day Sri Lanka
Sisunaga	Founder of a Magadhan dynasty
Sita	Wife of Rama
Soma	A type of creeper; also liquor made from Indian hemp or bhang
Sriraga	Melody sung or played in the afternoon.
Sura	Liquor
Surya	Sun god who rides a flaming chariot driven by seven horses
Sutra	A brief aphorism from a religious text
Takkas	A tribe
Taxila	An ancient city in the north-western region now in Punjab province of Pakistan
Talipot	A kind of palm tree
Tanunapatram	Oath of fealty
Tat Tvam Asi	Literally: 'That Thou Art', Chandogya Upanishad 6:8.7

Tathagatha	The way Buddha referred to himself, meaning: ‘a breeze, thus gone’
Tourti	A kind of flute
Udayibhada	Successor of Ajatshatru by patricide
Upanishads	Mystical texts learnt under the guidance of the guru
Upasaka	Disciple of the Buddha
Ushas	Goddess of dawn
Vachaspati	Another name for Brihaspati
Vaidehi	Princess and queen of Bimbisara
Vaishya	The third class of farmers and traders in the varna system
Vaishalaksha	Sage as well as a treaty of dharma, artha, kaama and moksha
Vanaprastha	The third stage in the life of an arya; that of a forest hermitage dweller
Varsha	Rainy season from July to September
Varuna	Oldest Vedic god; Lord of the entire universe; god of water
Vasanta	Spring season from March to May
Vasishtha	Celebrated sage who composed several hundred hymns in the <i>Rig Veda</i>
Vasudeva	King of the Yadavas, father of Krishna
Vayu	God of Wind; son of Vishnu
Vedanta	The culmination of knowledge
Vessantara	Prince who gives up everything as narrated in Jataka tales
Videha	Country lying to the north-east of Magadha
Vindhya	A mountain range
Vishalaksha	Pre-Kautilyan author of the <i>Arthashastra</i> . Also Bharadvaja, Vatavyadhi
Vishnu	The Preserver; second of the Trinity; also connected with sacrifices
Vritra	Demon killed by Indra
Yagnya	Sacrifice; to worship in the form of oblations
Yajnyavalkya	Legendary sage of Vedic India, who is the key figure in

the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*.

Yajus	Sacrificial mantra from the <i>Yajur Veda</i>
Yama	God of death
Yamuna	The great tributary of the Ganga
Yavanas	A term applied to the peoples of the west and also Greeks
Yoga	School of philosophy; also mystical training
Yogi	A practitioner of Yoga
Yojana	A measure of distance anywhere between four and nine miles
Yuvaraja	Crown Prince
Sara, antosarah	Inner essence



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